



Umikaze Minamino

Illustration by Laruha

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KUNON the SORCERER
Can See



“I am connected to my power. And my power is connected to my magic. In that case, if I make an eyeball with magic, would I be able to see? Can I do it? Is such a thing even possible? No—I *will* do it. I have to.”

—Kunon Gurion

KUNON the SORCERER
Can See

Kunon
Can
See

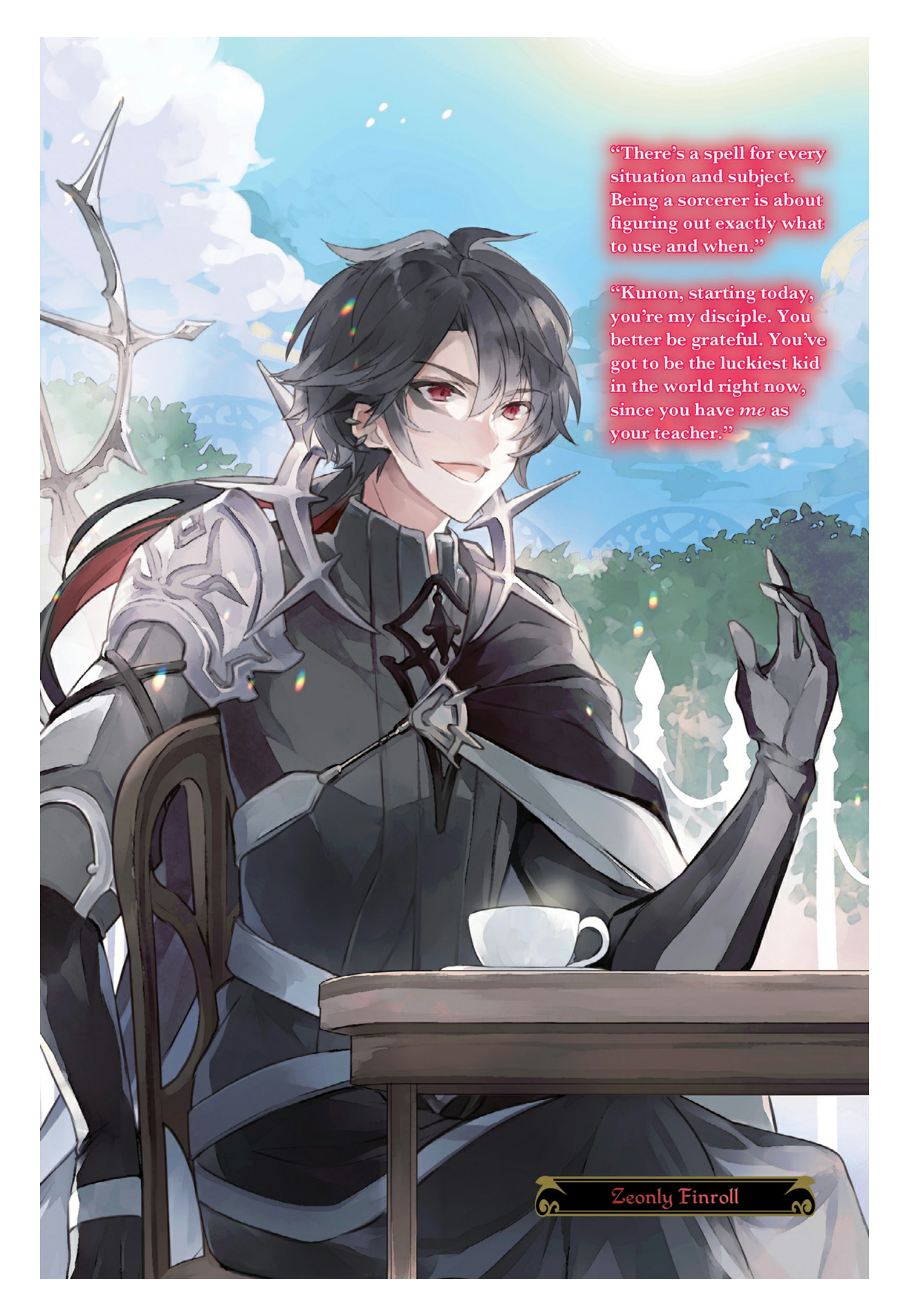




Two years had passed since the day when Jenie's careless words jump-started her pupil's rapid development. As usual, they were in the garden in front of the detached house, running magic drills.

Jenie nodded with satisfaction. She had a lot on her mind. There's really nothing I can teach him anymore.

Kunon Gurion

A full-page illustration of a young man with dark, wavy hair and red eyes, sitting at a wooden table outdoors. He is wearing a dark, high-collared robe with a silver, ornate brooch at the neck and silver gauntlets on his forearms. He is holding a white teacup with his right hand. The background shows a bright blue sky with white clouds, green foliage, and a white building in the distance. The overall style is anime-inspired with soft lighting and a warm atmosphere.

“There’s a spell for every situation and subject. Being a sorcerer is about figuring out exactly what to use and when.”

“Kunon, starting today, you’re my disciple. You better be grateful. You’ve got to be the luckiest kid in the world right now, since you have *me* as your teacher.”

Zeonly Finroll

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NEW YORK

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KUNON the SORCERER *Can See*

UMIKAZE MINAMINO

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Prologue

Life could change with a single word.

It didn't matter whether it was filled with immeasurable love or stemmed from the depths of the deepest malice and loathing.

It might even be a perfunctory word said without the slightest heat or emotion.

Sorcerer Jenié Kors knew this well.

It was a careless word that changed the boy.

"Ah...well. I guess it's about the size of an eyeball."

Jenié was at a loss. She wasn't sure how to explain what she meant to her student.

He couldn't see, so he didn't understand. How should she put the size of something into words? He knew what a sphere was, but the size...

After struggling for a little while, she reached that answer.

He understood the parts of his own body, even if he couldn't see them. So she used his eyes—human eyes—as an example for comparison.

As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. She had brought up the topic of eyes to someone who couldn't see. She'd thought long and hard, and it was really the only comparison she could come up with, but...she immediately felt guilty for being so careless.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...um...", Jenié faltered.

She stopped speaking when she saw the boy.

He had lifted his head. His vacant, silvery pupils were blown wide.

Jenié had only ever seen him with his head down, looking reserved, almost soulless...as though life was unbearable for him.

The boy lost control over the A-ori he was maintaining, and it struck the ground with a splash.

“A round...sphere of...water...about the size...of an eyeball? An eyeball? Is...is that so...?”

The boy whispered those words to himself repeatedly. Over, and over, and over again, as if he were carving them with water into his desiccated heart.

The boy was just seven years old.

That was probably the moment Kunon Gurion, the sorcerer who couldn't see, was truly born.

Two years had passed since the day when Jenié's careless words jump-started her pupil's rapid development.

As usual, they were in the garden in front of the detached house, running magic drills.

“Next! Whirlpool!”

“Yes!”

On command, a stream of water flowed from the large A-ori hovering in front of the small sorcerer. The resulting eddy—big enough to easily swallow two or three people—surged so violently that anyone entering it would drown in an instant.

“Next! Bring it to a stop, then separate it into thirty pieces!”

“Yes!”

The ring of water came to an abrupt halt before splitting into thirty distinct A-ori.

“Next! Thirteen red, eleven blue, and six green!”

“Yes!”

As instructed, the spheres began to change color. Bathed in sunlight, the dyed A-ori sparkled like jewels.

“Next! Dog, cat, cow, monkey, sheep, cat, sheep, cow, human!”

“Yes!”

The A-ori re-formed into a single sphere, transforming into each creature as the commands rang out.

Jenié nodded with satisfaction. She had a lot on her mind.

There’s really nothing I can teach him anymore.

He surpassed me so quickly. I can’t do any of these things. What am I doing, reeling off these commands like it’s nothing, when I, his teacher, can’t do any of it myself? How is he able to perform at this level? I probably shouldn’t even have assigned him tasks this extreme, and yet he hasn’t even broken a sweat!

Honestly, she thought. It might be time for me to quit.



Chapter 1

The Hero's Scar and the Boy Who Couldn't See

Long, long ago, when the Great War of the Seventeen Kings broke out between the Demon Lord and the rest of the world, seventeen brave warriors were chosen—one from each country.

From this country, the Kingdom of Hughlia, a prince and holy knight named Histor Hughlia took up his sword and boldly went forth to face the Demon Lord.

The battle between these seventeen champions and the Demon Lord was fierce, and more than half the warriors died in the fight. Histor had the good fortune to survive, but he returned home missing an arm and a leg.

From then on, descendants of warriors who fought in the Great War occasionally gave birth to children who were *missing something*. Sometimes it was an arm—or a leg. Sometimes fingers or ears. Some of the children were missing both eyes or simply their eyesight—others lacked emotions or their sense of taste.

This was said to be the result of the Demon Lord's curse, though each country had its own explanation for the phenomenon.

In the Kingdom of Hughlia, at least, it became known as the Hero's Scar and

was considered auspicious. Children of high status with this mark might be chosen as heirs to the throne, to one day lead the people as their kings and queens.

But that was all a thing of the past. No one had been born with the Hero's Scar for a hundred years—that is, until the birth of Marquess Gurion's son.

Kunon Gurion came into this world without his sight.

The Hughlian royal family held a great celebration to commemorate the first child in a century to carry the Hero's Scar. The person in question, however, was indifferent.

He couldn't see.

He couldn't see anything.

Not his parents' faces. Not his kind elder brother. He couldn't see beautiful things. He couldn't see light or darkness. He couldn't see anything.

What did some noble Hero's Scar matter to him? His lack of sight didn't make him feel happy or honored.

When Kunon was three years old, he realized something.

The people around him were very caring. His parents, his elder brother, the maid who assisted him—they all treated him well.

But he could hear how others talked about him. Perhaps to compensate for his lack of sight, his sense of hearing was very acute.

"That child is blind, you know."

"So young. What a shame."

"I feel so sorry for him when he trips and injures himself like that..."

These voices were all around him... Probably nearby servants. He heard them all the time, even when he didn't want to.

He hadn't grasped the meaning of their words at first, but as he grew and learned, he gradually understood.

Ah, he realized. I'm different from everyone else.

He frequently heard people talking about “being able to see” and “not being able to see,” so he knew it was something he was lacking.

What did it mean to see?

At the very least, it must be something that prevented one from falling and getting hurt so often.

Eventually, he’d stopped being bothered by the voices. Regardless of what anyone said, there was nothing to be done about his blindness. And no one said such things to his face, so he could just pretend he didn’t hear them.

The sighing was the problem.

People often expressed their emotions through sighs. Pitying sighs, sighs of anxiety about what would become of him, worried sighs that leaked out every time Kunon slipped and injured himself. Kunon had heard those sighs hundreds of times. They pierced his heart deeply over and over again, even more than the thoughtless words.

I can’t see. I can’t move around by myself. I have to rely on others.

I can’t survive on my own.

Around the age of seven, when Kunon was already fully aware of his circumstances, a water crest appeared on his body. The crest was proof that he held magical power. Evidently, Kunon could perform water magic.

His parents and brother rejoiced. But Kunon only muttered to himself, “So what?”

So what?

Those were his true feelings.

In the end, it didn’t matter. He couldn’t see anything, and he couldn’t do anything or go anywhere without help.

“Haah...”

Mirika sighed somewhere in front of Kunon.

This was Mirika Hughlia, ninth princess of the Kingdom of Hughlia. At nine, she was two years Kunon’s senior.

Without his knowledge, the two of them had been betrothed.

Although Mirika had greeted him properly to his face, she was clearly disappointed in Kunon, and because of this, she sighed.

Well, of course, Kunon thought.

What did the Hero's Scar or the water crest matter? Ultimately, he was just a boy who couldn't see. Their engagement had been ordered by the king—there was no way she wanted to marry him. Who would willingly choose someone like him?

Her sigh was quiet, but Kunon could hear it.

He wished he couldn't. It was a sigh of distinct unhappiness.

As the two of them spent more time together, Mirika started to become unkind.

"Your Highness? Princess Mirika?"

The two of them had been walking around the Gurion family gardens—Mirika leading the way—when she disappeared. Or to be more precise, when she pretended to disappear and quietly slipped away.

Kunon's hearing and his ability to sense the presence of others had developed to compensate for his lack of sight. In general, he had a pretty good idea of how those around him were moving.

He knew that Mirika was quietly sneaking away from him, and he could tell which direction she was going. She wasn't far. As expected, she wouldn't abandon him entirely.

What a pain, he thought.

To begin with, they were in his family's garden. He had a cane, and he knew his own location by the smell of the plants and the flow of the air.

Having lived here for seven years, Kunon had memorized the area's layout, even if he couldn't see it. And besides, if he shouted, servants would come running for him.

He thought of simply going back to the house but ultimately decided that if it

was his fiancée's wish, he would pretend to frantically search for her.

If this is what she wants, I'll indulge her.

She had come all this way to visit him, after all.

But the whole time he was thinking, *Ugh. What a pain.*

With the appearance of the water crest, Kunon began training in magic as part of his daily routine.

In addition to a private tutor who did nothing but read aloud to him from books about the world, he gained a water magic instructor.

"Yes, like that. Remember that feeling."

Kunon felt something decrease within him as a change occurred nearby, and his teacher, Jenié, praised him for it.

But Kunon, unable to see the transformation, only vaguely understood what was going on. He couldn't experience firsthand the fruits of his labor, whether success or failure, so all he could do was practice exactly as he was told.

Then one day, after approximately three months of this, Kunon opened his eyes.

What kind of magic am I doing right now?

He wasn't very interested in magic, but he wanted to have an idea of what he was doing, so he asked.

And his magic tutor's reply caught him by surprise.

"I guess it's about the size of an eyeball."

There were several spheres of water floating around him, and apparently, they were each *about the size of an eyeball*.

His teacher's casual, almost rude remark awakened something in Kunon. He felt shaken to his core in a way he had never experienced before.

His deepest wish, one he had thought would never come true no matter how hard he prayed, soared up inside him. Yearning flooded his heart.

"Oh. All I have to do is make eyes on the *outside*."

Kunon possessed magic power, and he could release that power outside of himself.

Kunon was connected to his power.

And his power was connected to his magic.

And in that case, if he made an *eyeball* with magic, wouldn't he be able to see?

With magic, maybe he could obtain the sight he lacked.

Can I do it?

Was such a thing even possible?

No—I will do it. I have to.

Whether it was possible didn't matter. He was going to do it. No matter what.

Up until now, Kunon couldn't even see the point of living. This was his first great wish—no, it was a desire he had harbored as far back as he could remember.

I want to see my family.

I want to see the world around me.

I want to see everything.

What did it mean to see?

I want to know. I want to know so badly.

Sight was something the people around him took for granted. But for Kunon, it was something he craved more than anything.

And so Kunon devoted himself to magic.



“Amazing...”

Could a different perspective really change someone's way of looking at the world so completely?

Kunon had resolved to obtain sight through magic, and from the moment he

decided to pursue that goal, he saw everything in a positive light.

The first difference he experienced was the way he ate.

Before, he had always eaten the same bite-size sandwiches just to survive. How they tasted was secondary. As long as they weren't difficult to eat, it was fine. He hadn't even known what he was eating.

But that was before.

Now he wanted to know. What was the flavor of each individual ingredient that mixed together in his mouth to create one whole taste? What was this crisp, fresh, leaflike thing? What was that acidic flavor smeared over the bread?

Oh, I know this one, he thought. Sliced apple.

"The leafy one is lettuce. There's mustard on the bread."

Kunon had asked his personal maid, Iko, what he was eating.

"Oh, and that's apple," she added.

"I already knew that one."

Its vivid flavor and texture were unmistakable—so distinctive that after tasting it once and learning its name, he wouldn't likely forget.

"...Actually, it's a plum disguised as an apple."

"Huh? Plum? What's that?"

In order to perceive things with magic, Kunon would need a strong recognition and memory of the things he wanted to sense.

His magic tutor told him that if he was determined, anything and everything in his daily life could become a part of his training.

Kunon, who still wasn't very skilled at using his powers, needed to learn to flawlessly employ his magic at will.

"What's this, hmm?" asked Iko. "Do *you* know, Master Kunon?"

Recently, she had been amusing herself by preparing different foods for him to try.

But she was overdoing it—in several ways.

“I’m going to tell them to dock your pay.”

“Oh, my apologies. I got carried away.”

After breakfast, his tutor would come.

That morning, Kunon was to study at his desk.

It was called studying, but in actuality Kunon simply listened while someone read a book to him, and then they chatted about the content.

Due to his vision, even Kunon’s tutor often seemed perplexed about how to conduct his education. Since they couldn’t use more conventional methods, they had settled on this approach.

Baroness Flora Garden had worked as one of Kunon’s teachers for two years already, since he was five. The baroness was over thirty and had a gentle voice and demeanor.

She also had a child of her own, about Kunon’s age. She clearly felt a lot of pity for Kunon. Even after two years of teaching him, he still heard her sigh in sympathy and compassion from time to time.

“History?” she asked.

“Yes. I would like to hear about Holy Knight Histor in particular.”

The Great War of the Seventeen Kings.

To Kunon, it was a loathsome old legend—the source of his blindness. He would make a sour face whenever Flora mentioned the story, and so she made a point of avoiding it.

In Hughlia, the tale was as well-known as a children’s nursery rhyme, but with Kunon’s sensitivities...she couldn’t bring herself to teach him about it.

At a loss for how to reply, Flora looked to Iko, who was standing against the wall, waiting to attend to her charge should the need arise.

Is it okay? Flora asked with her eyes.

Iko got the message and gave a small nod.

“Very well,” said Flora.

She closed the book she'd brought for the day's lesson.

She didn't know why, but Kunon was trying to confront his problems. Or at least, that was how the baroness saw it.

And so Flora decided to go along with his request.

After the study session, Kunon had some free time.

With his new goal in mind, he eagerly took the chance to practice magic.

"A-ori."

Iko had escorted Kunon to the garden, and he was now reciting the A-ori spell—the most rudimentary water-based skill.

"Good job, Master Kunon!" she cried.

Drawing upon some indefinable power within himself, he created several A-ori in the surrounding air. Apparently, he'd managed four of them, each about the size of *an eyeball*.

"Oh, what do we have here?" Iko said. "Just an extraordinary sorcerer, that's all!"

Somehow, he had to make them into real eyes.

I don't know what to do.

Even his magic tutor said she didn't know—or rather, she didn't seem to understand what Kunon was getting at in the slightest.

He wanted to use water magic to make eyes.

It seemed to Kunon that most sorcerers thought what he was trying to do was crazy or impossible. Or perhaps, rather than impossible, it had simply never been tried. People who could see would have no need for such things.

"Excellent form!" Iko called out.

And that meant there was no one to teach him how. Kunon would have to do it himself.

"...Hngh."

He still wasn't accustomed to using his power. Sustaining the A-ori spell had

winded him in moments. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“I just can’t help cheering when I see a kid working so hard!” said Iko.

Before long, his concentration fizzled out, and the A-ori plummeted to the grass and burst.

“Haah, haah.”

Kunon was panting.

But then he caught his breath.

He cast the spell again.



Time slipped by unnoticed as he repeated the incantation over and over and over. Eventually, his consciousness started to blur.

“Master Kunon!”

When he awoke, Kunon was in his bed.

He must have collapsed, and Iko had carried him there.

“...Not bad.”

His body was exhausted. All his muscles ached.

But he felt okay.

To anyone else, it might have been a trivial day. But Kunon had felt alive.

Not bad.

He would give it everything he had the next day, too.

He couldn't see the future, but even Kunon's eyes could make out the tiniest glimmer of hope.

“Iko? Are you there?” he asked.

“Yes, I'm here.”

“You talked way too much while I was practicing.”

“Thank goodness you finally brought it up. If you had kept ignoring me, I would have gone to bed tonight crying.”

I should have sent her off in tears, Kunon thought. She was so distracting.



“It's not enough. Not enough at all.”

It was nighttime. One week had passed since Kunon set his mind on obtaining his eyesight.

He was having dinner in his room. As he ate his sandwich, concentrating on the ingredients and identifying each one, he reflected on his day.

After gradually growing used to his power and magic, he realized there were

far too many things he was lacking.

Lessons with a private tutor in the mornings, independent magical study in the afternoons—he'd done the same thing each day for the past week. And he didn't necessarily want to change that, even though he'd seen essentially no progress.

But it wasn't enough.

"What? I haven't been showing you enough affection?" Iko said as she served him. Kunon ignored her.

"I get plenty of affection..."

Shoot. He'd replied without thinking.

"Oh good. Then I haven't showered you with love in vain."

"No, you're fine."

"If you need even *more* affection, we'll simply have to share a bed, won't we?! Oh, should we have a sleepover tonight?!"

"I'll pass."

His maid aside, Kunon was loved by his father, mother, and elder brother. He felt crushed with guilt over how much he was loved. And because of his own love for them, Kunon found it hard to be around them.

That's why he'd had them prepare a separate building a short distance from the main home, where Kunon now lived with his maid. It had all been at his request.

If he lived together with his family, they would worry about him and sigh over him. It would be depressing. Kunon didn't want that.

And even now, his family would come to see him occasionally. That's why Kunon felt sure they loved him.

For the sake of his family, he wanted to gain his eyesight, no matter what. He didn't want to make them worry anymore.

"I don't have enough knowledge or magical power. And I feel like I'm especially lacking in physical strength."

He had fainted almost every day for the past week.

Was it his meager magical power? His weak body? Most likely both were to blame.

“That’s to be expected, isn’t it? You’re only seven, young master. Your mind and body are still growing.”

Iko was right.

But growth happened slowly. Much too slowly.

Kunon wanted to see as soon as possible. He couldn’t let the years pass him by as he waited for his mind and body to develop.

“...But you’re right,” she continued. “You don’t eat much, so you might be a little small for your age.”

Kunon nodded. *Of course.* “I’m too small, too.”

Then the solution was clear. He needed to eat a lot more. And— “I should train my body a bit, I suppose.”

Because he couldn’t see, Kunon didn’t move around much. If he did so recklessly, he would just crash into something or fall down. Consequently, he was so out of shape that a short walk could wind him.

Iko, on the other hand, never had any trouble—even when carrying him around after he’d collapsed.

Until recently, Kunon hadn’t cared about living, so it hadn’t mattered. But that wasn’t the case anymore.

“That’s true...,” Iko said. “It might be a good idea to put on a bit more muscle.”

The past week had taught Kunon that whether he was using his powers or harnessing those powers into magic, it all came down to his physical condition. It was about strength.

He’d get nowhere if he ran out of breath after only two or three spells. To keep going, he needed a certain level of physical fitness. Otherwise, he wouldn’t get the most out of his training.

There was a well-known story about a foolish ruler of some country or other who went down in history for attempting to implement all sorts of reforms and battle corruption in a single stroke, only to die without accomplishing anything.

In short, the ruler tried to do too many things at once and failed.

To prevent that from happening to him, Kunon needed to set himself firmly on a single course of action and do what he was capable of, one thing at a time. Surely that would prove the quickest path in the end.

Magic was the most important. It would take top priority.

Training his body would be second. He would work to achieve a physique suited to using magic.

Once he'd used up his magic, he would train his body, and when his body was tired, he would hone his magic.

Theoretically, it should be an efficient way to proceed.

This is it, Kunon thought. I know what I have to do.

"Iko, I want to eat more," he said.

"Understood."

"Also, I want to start training my body. What do you think I should do?"

The first ideas that came to mind were walking and running, but...things like that weren't possible for Kunon. He would only fall and get hurt.

Iko, who had seen him fall countless times, already understood that.

"Hmm... How about practice swings? You could stand in one spot to do it."

"Practice swings? Like with a sword?"

"Exactly."

"Could you teach me how?"

Kunon thought he understood what she was saying, but unfortunately, he had never seen it done. Asking a capable teacher to help would be better than simply using his imagination.

"Oh, I can't. I don't have any experience with swordplay. Why don't you ask

the marquess? If it's just swinging, I'm sure even one of the gatekeepers could teach you."

"Okay. Would you ask him for me?"

"Of course. I'll ask him later today... Oh, both the marquess and marchioness are out tonight, I think. I'll try talking to Mr. Balen about it tomorrow, okay?"

Balen was the Gurion family butler. When both the master and lady of the house were absent, management of the estate was Balen's responsibility.

"Yes, please do," said Kunon.

His to-do list had grown. It would be fun, though, to chip away at it.

He was certain that training his body and training his magic were two inseparable elements of a single whole.

No matter how difficult the road ahead, Kunon intended to overcome the obstacles and work as hard as necessary to gain his sight.

As far as Kunon was concerned, that was his only reason for living.

The next afternoon, as Kunon was sweating his way through his magic drills, he heard footsteps he didn't recognize.

"Hello, young master. My name is Ouro Tauro. I'm a former instructor of the Eastern Tiger school of swordplay."

Judging from the hoarseness of his voice, Kunon thought the speaker must be an elderly man. And because the voice came from relatively low to the ground, he was probably short.

"Ouro... Master Ouro, is it?"

Kunon thought he remembered a Master Ouro as the one who taught his elder brother swordplay.

"Yes, the very same," the man replied. "I heard you wished to be taught how to swing a sword. I came as soon as I could."

"Is it really okay for a well-known master like yourself to teach me...? I'm blind, as you can tell, and I can't expect to learn properly..."

Some of Kunon's old reticence reared its head. But the swordsman laughed.

“Ah-ha-ha. You know, swordplay isn’t ‘proper’ to begin with. It’s a way of training the body so that a weak person may become strong. Transforming a weak creature into a strong one goes against the natural order. Can you really call something like that proper?”

Well, Kunon thought. I don’t really understand what he’s talking about, but it sounds like he’s willing to teach me.



Chapter 2

The World in Color

“Five.”

“Yes.”

This is worrying.

That was Jenié’s honest reaction.

It was one of her days working at the Gurion house. She had arrived on time and was currently watching her pupil practice magic in the garden outside his detached house.

She had landed this job as a private magic tutor fresh out of magic school. The pay was high and the hours were short, and her student was a child so new to magic he probably couldn’t even spell the word. He was a novice whose water crest had only just appeared, and he didn’t know the first thing about using his power.

Even for an unremarkable sorcerer like Jenié, he was an easy pupil to teach—until five months ago. Actually, it was two months ago, to be exact.

She had blurted out one careless word, and much to her surprise, it had

ignited her student's desire to learn.

The two months since the incident had flown by.

"Six," she called out.

"Yes."

Her pupil had been quiet, always looking at his feet, doing only as instructed. For better or worse, he had been easy to deal with... A child who was all but dead inside. Though after that day, it was like he came to life.

Jenié had been happy at first. But soon her feelings changed.

She taught him twice a week, and every time she saw him, he was even better.

She knew he had started to enjoy magic, but it seemed his devotion was much deeper than Jenié had realized.

"...Can you make another?" she asked.

"Yes."

He was progressing too fast.

With each of Jenié's instructions, the number of A-ori floating around the boy increased. And he was maintaining them all at once.

At first, it was all he could do to make two of these floating spheres of water. Then he progressed to six. And now seven.

What's more, his A-ori weren't trembling, unstable blobs of water. They were nicely spherical and uniform in size. Their lack of fluctuation was proof that the magic was stable, and the consistency in their shape and size was evidence of the boy's careful control.

His mastery of this most basic skill—creating water with magic—was quite high.

Jenié herself couldn't create A-ori as fine and precise as these. At best, she could produce five, maybe six, unstable spheres, and she couldn't maintain them for very long.

...What should I do? she wondered.

Inwardly, Jenié was at a loss.

Her pupil—Kunon Gurion—was still a child of seven.

Magic was a useful skill, but it was by no means safe. For all its convenience, it could become a deadly weapon at any time. That was the nature of this power. There were spells that could kill an adult even when cast by a mere child.

The head of the Gurion family—Jenié's employer and Kunon's father—told her to teach his son only the basics. Jenié didn't approve of parents who let their children have dangerous weapons, so she agreed with the Gurion house's policy.

But Kunon had already grasped enough magic to progress to the next stage. At this rate, there weren't many things left for Jenié to teach him. That said...

There was no way she could quit. She would lose her livelihood. She wanted to keep this cushy job at least until she found a new one—to line her pockets while she could.

And that's why she was worried. What should she do?

Aha. And that's when an idea had popped into her head.

If she couldn't teach him anything new, why not show him how to further develop the skill he already had: A-ori.

His power was stable and under control, after all. The boy's precision was already so advanced. He should be able to add some variety.

That's it.

If she lost her job now, she wouldn't be able to make a living. All she needed was to keep it up for another year—even half a year. She had to do her best to hold out there.

Of course, the Gurion family's policy on higher-level magic could change, and she might be able to teach him something else. If that happened, she could probably add on another year.

Jenié wasn't an outstanding sorcerer, but she wasn't hopeless, either. Though not her strong suit, she could try to teach the boy some magical alterations.

Altering spells wasn't a necessary skill until one learned intermediate-level magic. The range of things you could do with alterations was extremely varied, and so if you learned it while still inexperienced, it would be difficult to adequately master.

But that was exactly why it was perfect for buying time.

Besides, Jenié was genuinely interested as a fellow sorcerer in seeing how far Kunon could go from here.

Maybe, just maybe, this boy could reach the world's highest magical rank: Cerulean Sorcerer.



"Starting today, we're going to do something a little different," said Jenié.

Once Kunon's magic drills—which were becoming a bit monotonous—were over, the two of them sat down at a table Iko had prepared in the garden.

Usually, they would spend this time talking about magic over tea. But it seemed his tutor had other thoughts today.

"Different?" he asked.

Frankly, Kunon was fine with things as they were. He was still lacking in all sorts of areas and wanted to keep plugging away as he was.

He was finally able to finish his afternoon drills without collapsing. He felt like everything up until now was mere preparation, and his real practice was about to begin.

"Master Kunon," his tutor began. "The A-ori you've been producing are water magic at its most basic. Essentially, it's the first spell a water sorcerer learns. All it does is make water."

"Yes."

"Now, let's classify the properties of this spell."

"...Classify?"

"Let's identify its features one by one. Can you think of a few?"

Kunon considered the question.

“Um... Create water, make it float, keep the water in a sphere... Something like that?”

“Excellent.”

Both his tutor and maid clapped.

“While we’re at it,” Jenié continued, “if we go further by specifying the water’s temperature and viscosity, composition, color, shape, luster, and scent—we would end up with a lot more properties. In short, what we call water comes in many forms... *A-ori*.”

Kunon felt his teacher’s magic stirring. He could sense two water spheres hovering in front of him.

“I just cast two A-ori in front of you, Master Kunon. Please try to touch them.”

As instructed, he reached out to touch the magic before him—

“There’s a cold one and a warm one, isn’t there?” he said.

The left sphere felt cold. The right, warm.

“Exactly. By adding such alterations, the magic gains *character*. This is where one sees the difference, or the disparity in talent, between sorcerers.”

“Character...? You mean like how the same spell cast by you is completely different when cast by a Royal Sorcerer?”

“Yes, that’s correct. I’m sure an A-ori cast by a Royal Sorcerer wouldn’t look a thing like mine. They are the most outstanding sorcerers in the entire country... My grades in magic school weren’t bad, but there were other students above me, alas. The requirements for Royal Sorcerers are extremely strict. That’s why their salary—”

Kunon had been the one to bring up the subject, but he wasn’t listening anymore. He pretended to pay attention to his teacher’s grumblings, but in his head, he was obsessing over the “character” of magic.

In other words, his tutor was saying that the fine details of a spell could be altered. Kunon felt that this would prove extremely relevant to his ambition to

create eyes.

Obviously, an ordinary A-ori couldn't become an eye.

But if he was to change it, alter it, add *character*—things might be different.

One step closer to the goal, Kunon thought, ignoring his teacher as she continued to ramble.

The concept of magic “character” that his teacher had introduced fascinated Kunon.

The more he tested it out, the more effective he became. Through trial and error, attempting this and that alteration, his power and magic naturally improved.

It was infinitely more engrossing than the days when he was merely producing endless regular A-ori.

“Iko, try drinking this.”

“Master Kunon?”

Kunon had been practicing magic in his room for a few days.

He had avoided doing so before, since a mistake might have flooded the place. But since he was now used to manipulating and controlling his power, he was confident he wouldn't make such a careless error.

He ran magic drills in his room, and when his magic was used up, he went outside to hone his body by swinging a staff.

Lately, he could tell he was getting stronger. It seemed two months was enough time to see some results.

Now Kunon had just called out for his maid. Iko had been embroidering in her room, waiting to be of service. He offered her the cup on the table.

There was water in it.

“Oh, flavored water again?” she asked.

“Yep.”

To create the water, he had taken a normal A-ori, divided it down into its

characteristics, and added his own alterations. Kunon couldn't see color, so he was testing other kinds of changes.

That day he was focused on flavor.

"Don't mind if I do— Oh, it tastes like apples. It's faint, though."

"I thought a weaker flavor would be perfect for drinking."

"Ah, I see. That makes sense. If you were drinking a lot at once, something lightly flavored might be best... This is quite delicious."

"But if I cut off the magic, the taste goes away—like so."

"Oh, you weren't kidding... Ugh, this is awful. It's really bad. Somehow, it's more bitter than regular water. Terrible."

Kunon was aware of how bad it tasted. It wasn't really suitable for drinking. That's why he had altered its flavor. Should he be without drinking water at some point, he wanted to use this flavored water to rehydrate.

"Magic is amazing, isn't it?" said Iko. "For someone like me, who can't use it, it's like a little divine miracle."

"You're right. I think so, too."

And if it was a divine miracle, Kunon believed he should be able to make eyes with it.

Although his goal hadn't changed, he had calmed down somewhat. It had begun to sink in that the finish line was still quite a ways away.

It's going to be a long, hard road, he thought.

He had concluded that progressing slowly but surely was the best bet. Kunon knew from experience that his magic would fail if he got impatient. Magic didn't work well when it was rushed.

"Well, in any case, your being able to make hot water has been really helpful," said Iko. "Even just the extra water was very nice, of course."

Kunon was barely more than a beginner, but he still had his uses as a sorcerer. Between providing water for everyday use and hot water through alterations, the plumbing situation in his detached house had improved considerably.

Before, Kunon had only been able to take a bath about once every three days. But since he became able to produce hot water, he could bathe every day.

Iko was really enjoying the time saved not having to prepare the bath and getting to take her own baths every day as well.

“Once you’re a little more practiced, how would you feel about helping prepare baths in the main house, too?” she asked.

“Oh, good idea.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to him, but Kunon was in favor.

The detached house where he stayed with Iko had been built for his own comfort. His family, however, lived in the main house.

They had a lot of servants, so preparing the bath probably wasn’t a big deal—but if helping with hot water was one of the few things Kunon could do for his family, he would do it happily.

The more-withdrawn Kunon of the past might not have thought that way, but he was different now—his outlook was much more positive.

He hadn’t quite realized it yet, but through his magical and physical training, Kunon was starting to believe in himself.

After using up all his magic, Kunon practiced swinging a staff the way Master Ouro had patiently taught him.

“Master Kunon.”

He was covered in sweat and just about to run out of steam when Iko called his name, breaking his concentration.

How long had he been practicing? Without his noticing, the wind blowing over his face had grown cold. He couldn’t see the color of the sky, but he wasn’t able to feel the warmth of the sun anymore.

“Dinnertime already?” he asked.

“Yes. Let’s go back to our rooms.”

Kunon stopped his practice and let Iko lead him by the hand to the detached house. He was uncomfortable from the sweat and wanted to take a bath right

away, but...

“Master Kunon, a letter has arrived from Princess Mirika.”

“Huh?”

This unexpected news threw his otherwise normal day into chaos. The timing was horrible. Chills ran down his spine, and they weren’t just from the sweat.

“We can discuss the details later,” said Iko, “but basically, she’s requesting a visit with you.”

Iko had permission to open and read letters addressed to Kunon, since he couldn’t do it himself. Actually, his father checked his letters before sending them on to the detached house.

Mirika Hughlia was the ninth princess of the royal family. She was still a child, but she was well aware of her position. She wasn’t foolish enough to write about royal secrets or private matters in a letter.

But just in case, precautions had to be taken. Iko’s position would be jeopardized if she accidentally learned something she shouldn’t have, so the letter had to be approved before it reached her.

“Um... Tell her I have a cold,” said Kunon.

“You used that one a month ago.”

“A stomachache.”

“You’ve used that one, too.”

“...I fell and scraped my knee or something, then.”

“What if she says you can meet anyway? Won’t that be a problem?”

“.....”

Kunon was in trouble. He didn’t need Iko to tell him that.

He hadn’t seen his fiancée in two months. They hadn’t met even once since he’d found his purpose in magic.

They were supposed to visit every two weeks, but Kunon didn’t have time to see Mirika. So he kept feigning illness and declining her requests.

For her part, Mirika probably had no desire to see Kunon, either.

Her fiancé had been chosen for her by His Majesty the King, and so she grudgingly made the visits. If anything, the princess was probably overjoyed to have an excuse not to see him.

That said...

“...I can’t put it off any longer, can I?” he asked.

He didn’t want Mirika to visit, but it had to happen. Even if they kept their distance from each other as much as possible, they couldn’t get out of their engagement. It was a royal order, and this was their fate as nobility.

“I don’t think so,” Iko said. “Since His Majesty and your father have made the decision, putting it off any longer could cause trouble. For instance, what if Princess Mirika and His Majesty came to check on your well-being?”

That was out of the question.

Just imagining the king coming all the way to see him made Kunon break out in a cold sweat.

“...Right. I see. Tell her we can meet.”

He didn’t want to, but there was no other choice.

And so it was decided that, in a few days’ time, Mirika would pay a visit.



The landscape flew by as the horse-drawn carriage trundled on.

The sights streaming past were quite familiar. She’d seen them countless times, and every time, they grew more and more depressing.

“Ugh...”

This is awful.

Thinking that Kunon must feel the same, Mirika heaved a deep sigh.

This was Mirika Hughlia, the ninth princess of the kingdom, and presently nine years of age. She was the daughter of the current king—not that the distinction meant very much, considering how many brothers and sisters she had.

Currently, Mirika was on her way to her fiancé's house.

Kunon, who bore the Hero's Scar, had turned out to be a sorcerer, and so Mirika had been betrothed to him.

To put it simply, their engagement tied Kunon to the royal family.

Sorcerers were valuable. Whether in times of war or peace, excellent magic users were essential to the progress and defense of a nation.

Mirika was like a collar and chain that prevented Kunon from winding up in the hands of powerful nobles or foreign countries.

She didn't mind that so much. Mirika and Kunon were both the children of aristocrats, and political marriages were unavoidable. It was all part of being a member of the ruling class.

The problem was something else.

"...Ugh."

From their very first meeting, Mirika had found it difficult to be around Kunon. And the more time they spent together, the more difficult and depressing it became. Lately, it was so bad it was like there was a stone settling in the pit of her stomach. And that was to say nothing of how it affected her heart.

Mirika had met all kinds of children at the school for nobles she attended. Not even one of them was as taciturn, negative, dispirited, or perpetually gloomy as Kunon.

The two of them had nothing to talk about, either.

Kunon almost never started a conversation himself, and when Mirika realized that the vast majority of topics she brought up required sight, she clammed up. Plays, books, stories about her time at school—to someone who couldn't see, they were incomprehensible.

She found it truly painful to spend time with Kunon, and she suspected he hated being around her as well. The idea that they could like each other, even a little, was unthinkable. But they were obligated to spend time together, and there was no avoiding it.

“...Ugh...”

When she thought about living the rest of her life with Kunon...looking upon that sad, dull expression every day...

Once, she ran away from him.

They were walking in the garden without his maid, and she disappeared from his side. She didn't want to be near him.

After that, running from Kunon became a habit. Although she knew it wasn't good for either of them, she couldn't stand to be next to him.

And yet Mirika worried about leaving the boy on his own—and never went so far away that she couldn't see him. *What a truly pointless and half-hearted escape attempt*, she thought.

Kunon hadn't been well for the past two months—although he was probably faking it—so they weren't able to meet. But that couldn't go on forever.

As the Gurion estate rose into view, Mirika's sighs kept coming.

“It's a pleasure to see you again, Your Highness.”

At her first sight of Kunon in two months, Mirika's eyes went wide.

He was standing in front of the main house with his usual maid, but he looked utterly different from the boy she had met on her previous visit.

“I'm so sorry that I wasn't able to meet with you for a while due to my poor health.”

“Ah y-yes... Um, Kunon?”

“Yes?”

On the off chance that this was someone else, Mirika tried calling Kunon's name. But the boy in front of her was indeed the one who answered.

It really was him. This was Kunon.

His expression was bright. His body looked a little sturdier as well. But more than anything, he looked so cheerful. Before, he'd always had his head down, but now his face seemed to glow. Mirika couldn't say with certainty what was different, but without a doubt, his face had brightened. It was so bright that for

a moment she thought he might be wearing makeup—so bright that she wanted to ask what kind of products he was using.

What on earth?

What had happened in the last two months?

Mirika glanced at the maid standing behind Kunon—she had no idea how to interact with the boy, so she looked to his maid for help instead.

The woman sensed Mirika's gaze and seemed to understand.

“Your Highness looks as cute as ever today! If I were a big, bearded, middle-aged man I would be totally smitten with you! I'd pursue you to the ends of the earth!”

That's not what I wanted you to say! And what's with that scary scenario?

“Um, did something happen these past two months, Kunon?” asked Mirika.

Her first plan was going nowhere, so Mirika tried asking directly. Plus, she was a little frightened by the way Kunon's maid was looking at her. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what was behind that stare.

“It's magic,” the boy replied.

“Wh-what?”

“I fell in love with magic.”

“...I...see.”

She didn't really understand, but Kunon looked happy, so whatever it was, it must be a good thing. And most importantly, his face was so bright.

“Your Highness,” he began. “I'm sorry for always making you worry. Please let me explain myself today.”

“O-okay...”

Mirika was perplexed by this change in Kunon. But her bewilderment was only momentary.

The magic Kunon talked about and showed her was so enthralling.

He made water of different flavors. He broke it down into a fine mist and

created rainbows with the light. He produced a strange kind of water with the consistency of slime that Mirika could pinch between her fingertips.



It was all so amusing and deeply interesting. Before she knew it, it had grown dark, and it was time to return to the castle.

That was the first day Mirika spent with Kunon that didn't cause her any pain.



"Huh?!"

All of a sudden, Kunon let out a gasp.

"What?" asked Iko.

Kunon's magic training had continued day in, day out since that moment three months ago when he found his purpose. The mild weather of autumn was gone, and winter had arrived.

It was a day like any other, and Kunon was fiddling with A-ori in his room, when he abruptly leaped up from his seat.

"...Wh-what happened?" Iko called out nervously as Kunon stood, frozen.

"...I saw something. Maybe," he whispered.

Kunon stood in a daze, as if he couldn't believe his own shocking words.

The world seemed to pause for a moment... And then time restarted.

"No way!" exclaimed Iko. "Really?! Are you kidding me?! If you're making this up, I'll slap you, I swear! Do you mean it?!"

"Wait, hold on! I don't know, either! I'm not sure!"

Iko rushed to Kunon's side with great excitement. Kunon, meanwhile, was experiencing something new and was overcome with confusion. The unexpected event had shaken them both.

"And I don't know if I really 'saw' anything— *Ow, ow, ow!*"

"Please don't joke about things like that! Do you want me to send you flying?!"

Iko didn't really intend to hit him, but she did pinch his cheek as hard as she could. She had a bold personality for a maid.

“That’s not funny at all!” she said. “It is my enduring wish for you to become a gentleman of good humor, but that was in poor taste! Such jokes could land you in real trouble, Master Kunon!”

It seemed he was in for a lecture.

“No! That’s not what I meant! I think—I think I saw color!”

“Color?! You saw color?!”

“To be precise, I think I might have *felt* it! That’s why I don’t know if I *saw* it or not!”

A few moments of silence passed between them.

“...Wait, but isn’t that still amazing?” asked Iko.

“...What’s more, I don’t know if I’m perceiving things correctly...”

The burst of excitement subsided, and both of them began to calm down.

“This—this apple.”

With one hand still busy rubbing at his stinging cheek, Kunon used his other to pick up one of several apples on the table.

The apples had been put there for use in his magic experiments.

Kunon’s current obsession was with lowering temperatures—an alteration for freezing. Iko, however, would have preferred to avoid the cold indoors now that it was wintertime. But if Kunon wanted to do something, she wouldn’t deny him.

“Is this apple *red*?” he asked.

Iko frowned.

The apple wasn’t red. Kunon was holding a Golden Noble apple, though it would probably be more accurate to describe its color as pale green.

Would it be better to tell him the truth, or...? No, she couldn’t lie.

“It’s not red, young master.”

He was still experimenting, still testing. It was better to be honest.

It was okay if he couldn’t see *now*; as long as he could see *eventually*, it was

fine.

“Is that so?”

Iko expected Kunon to be shocked—to be disappointed that he hadn’t attained his desired result. But he kept his composure.

Calmly, he reached for the next apple.

“Is this one red, then?”

This second apple...was indeed red. Finally, Iko understood.

Of course. Kunon had never seen colors before, so he couldn’t yet match their name with their appearance.

“Yes, it is. The previous apple is called a Golden Noble, but its color is a pale green.”

“Huh? It’s called ‘golden’ even though it’s green?”

“That’s just how it is. By the way, can you tell how many apples of each color—red and green—are on the table?”

“Yeah. Three red apples, and two green Golden Nobles. Right?”

He was exactly right. In other words, he could really see color.

“Did I get it?”

“You got it! That’s amazing!”

Iko hugged Kunon with glee. Just as happy as she was, the boy let himself be hugged.

He hadn’t yet achieved his goal, but this was a major breakthrough.

“I still have a long way to go, though,” he said.

After this short celebration, Kunon collected himself.

He was now able parse the general color of the things around him. But that was all. Strictly speaking, he wasn’t “seeing.” He was just using his magic to sense his surroundings.

This was probably just Kunon’s conscious and unconscious mind doggedly reaching out, making use of the miraculous power of magic.

Miss Jenié said there were still many things about magic that remained a mystery. Apparently, some people could move objects using magic. And Kunon had heard of a phenomenon called magical perception. Whatever he had just managed was probably another type of perception.

Kunon's goal was to achieve sight through eyes made with magic. It sounded similar in theory but was totally different in practice.

Nevertheless, this was a huge step forward. Even if he couldn't see objects, if he could sense colors, he might be able to guess what the objects were, within reason. Especially if he was in a familiar space where he spent a lot of time.

That would certainly make life easier.

"Anyway, let's go tell the marquess! This is incredible!"

"Mmm... No, wait. I think it's still too early for that. It might have been a fluke. I want to wait until I'm a little better at it, so I don't disappoint Father."

"It'll be fine! Have a little faith in yourself!"

Kunon, reserved and introspective by nature, was reluctant. But the ever-optimistic Iko patted him firmly on the shoulder.

"This is the result of your hard work, Master Kunon! It's not a fluke; it's merit! It's because you're capable, young master! Without a doubt! Now, let's go! We'll tell him together. While we're at it, we can ask him to increase your allowance! Oh, and I'll ask for a raise, too!"

"What, right now?! Wait a—"

Iko ignored him.

Kunon was practically dragged to the main house. Midway through the trip, Iko scooped him up and carried him under her arm.

But Kunon's family wasn't home. So in the end, the two of them returned to the detached house empty-handed.



"Color...? You're saying he can see color?"

Arsan, head of the Gurion estate, had only just returned from business at the royal castle when Iko stopped him by the entrance. She had been waiting to share an astonishing report with him.

Arsan Gurion, still in his early thirties, was young for a marquess. He had a handsome face, with light-indigo eyes that gave off a slightly cold impression. His bright-auburn hair was neat and short. He wasn't especially tall, nor was he so good-looking as to draw the attention of strangers on the street. But upon careful inspection, all these parts produced an impressive whole.

By not standing out in any particular way, he maintained an incredible level of balance. And that was exactly why he was able to fit in with his peers and at the same time slowly carve out a name for himself.

Now, Arsan had secured both work inside the castle and the trust of His Majesty the King.

"Yes," Iko replied. "He doesn't have much range yet, but it seems he can properly distinguish between colors."

The maid continued her report as she took Arsan's coat and jacket from him.

"That's...incredible, isn't it?" said the marquess.

His youngest son, Kunon, had been born blind. His condition was said to be the result of the legendary Hero's Scar—already considered something of a fairy tale—though the true cause was unknown.

Regardless, the truth remained: Kunon could not see.

"I think so, too," said Iko. "It seems the closer he is to something, the better he can see it, and once he touches it, he has no trouble at all."

Things were clear once he touched them. In other words—

"Are you saying he could read a book?"

As expected of the marquess, Iko thought.

Indeed, Kunon could "read" books.

He and Iko had only discovered this after testing his ability in various ways, but Arsan deduced it immediately.

Yes, perhaps the best thing to come out of Kunon's new perception was the ability to read.

He just had to open a book and trace the words with his fingers. In that way, he could discern the color of the ink on the page and sense the shape of the letters written there. Of course, Kunon couldn't *read* yet, so he would need to learn first.

By the same method, he could make out pictures, so Kunon's current obsession was studying picture books and encyclopedias.

"...I see..." Arsan said with a heavy sigh of relief.

In that moment, his worries about his son's future lessened considerably. Arsan's body and mind were both exhausted, but his anxiety had vanished.

"Have you spoken to Tina about this?" he asked.

"No, my Lord."

"Then let me tell her."

Tina was Arsan's wife and Kunon's mother, Tinalisa. She worried more about Kunon than anyone else. Early on, she was so concerned about her son that she didn't leave his side even for a second, temporarily isolating herself from noble society.

A big reason Kunon had asked to live apart from the rest of the family was Tinalisa's extreme anxiety. No matter what Kunon did, she would fret over him and stick to him like glue.

As the wife of a marquess, Tinalisa was required to appear at social events.

Moreover, since Kunon was engaged to a member of the royal family, the Gurions' social conduct became even more important.

A princess had married into their family before, many generations ago.

The Hero's Scar was thought to be a curse left by the defeated Demon Lord, said to appear only among the descendants of those seventeen heroes engaged in the fighting. In the Kingdom of Hughlia, that meant only members of the royal family.

In short, though it had run thin, there were still traces of royal blood flowing in the Gurion family's veins.

That meant, should everything go topsy-turvy, in a *very* unlikely scenario, even Kunon might have a sliver of a chance at ascending the throne. And if that came to be, the odds of the Gurion family becoming embroiled in a dispute between royal factions would increase significantly. To secure their future prospects, they needed make appearances in society.

Such was the reality of being promised to a princess.

His Majesty had quite a few children, however, so the idea of Kunon succeeding was mostly hypothetical. But even if the chance was slim, it was still a possibility.

Kunon was the first child born with the Hero's Scar in almost a century. These days, such a thing was unlikely to cause any conflicts, but once again, it was still possible. After all, it had earned him a betrothal to a princess.

There was no telling what lay in Kunon's future, and that made social connections important. Though he may not be able to conduct himself skillfully, even an attempt to get along with those around him would surely make a difference in his and his family's fortunes.

Kunon had been the one to propose living in the detached house, but as the head of the family, Arsan was the one to approve it.

Tinalisa needed to be separated from Kunon in order to fulfill her duties as marchioness.

Kunon, still a child, didn't understand the particulars of aristocratic affairs, but his proposal was convenient. Seizing on the opportunity, Arsan persuaded Tinalisa, and Kunon's new living arrangements were decided.

Arsan also made it clear that his wife should visit Kunon as little as possible. Accordingly, he further forbade Iko from sharing news about the boy with his mother. If she had, the marchioness would be unable to resist rushing to Kunon's side.

But this new report was a different matter. He could tell his wife about this. Kunon had achieved something great, and no praise would be too much.

“Does Kunon intend to return to the main house?”

Arsan had been hearing a variety of things about his son.

Three months ago, Kunon began devoting himself seriously to magic. He’d started eating more to bulk up, and though he hadn’t quite taken up swordplay, he had begun swinging a staff. Recently, Kunon had started preparing baths in the main house, too.

Arsan had even heard that his son’s relationship with his fiancée, Mirika Hughlia, was improving.

All of a sudden, his reticent, unenthusiastic son had started living optimistically. Arsán couldn’t be happier. And it wasn’t as though Kunon lived apart from them because he hated his family.

In light of these changes in his son’s life, wouldn’t it be all right if they lived together? Arsán thought so, but...

“...It may still be too soon for that.” Iko looked reluctant. “Right now, the young master is trying to change himself. Every day, tirelessly, he keeps at it. At a time like this, if his environment or lifestyle changed, it could get in the way of his goal.”

“His goal, you say?”

Arsan had heard about that, too—his son wanted to gain vision through magic.

He wasn’t sure if such a thing could be done, but if that was what Kunon wanted, Arsán would support him. And now the boy was achieving results. Surely his efforts—thus far and into the future—would not be wasted.

Approximately half a year had passed since Kunon left the main house. He had grown used to living by himself, and the rest of the family had become used to life without Kunon.

For Arsán, things hadn’t changed much—but Tinalisa was finally starting to return to society. His other son, Ixio, often had trouble interacting with Kunon. It might sound bad, but he seemed more comfortable now.

“...I see. Let’s wait a little while longer and see how things go, shall we?”

The current situation was working well for everyone, Arsan thought. They each had their own business to attend to. Perhaps living together wasn't necessary.

If they all—or more importantly, if Kunon was in an environment where he could focus, it was probably best not to get in his way.

Arsan therefore made the decision to leave things as they were.

Iko was not in a position to express her personal opinions, but she had hoped for this outcome as well.

Kunon was in the process of opening up to those around him.

Before, he had viewed Iko as nothing more than a servant. She would tell jokes and try to make him smile, but she never got much of a reaction. He might have even thought of her as a nuisance.

Perhaps he simply hadn't been interested in people... Or maybe he felt resentment, jealousy, or hatred for them.

But now he had begun to respond to her. Kunon, with his unseeing eyes, was trying to perceive Iko, those around him, and people in general.

Iko didn't know much about magic, and she couldn't say whether Kunon would get his wish in the future. Nevertheless, she felt it was of the utmost importance for Kunon to open his heart right now, so he could learn things like compassion for others and social etiquette. She wanted him to become a more positive person, even if that meant overdoing it a little.

She didn't want him to make that gloomy expression ever again. Who would want to see a child looking so depressed?

"Iko, thank you for everything," said Arsan. "I know it's been quite hard on you, but..."

"I don't mind. I'm getting paid, after all. In fact, rather than words of praise, I'd prefer a raise."

Instead of acting humble and expressing vague sentiments of loyalty, Iko brought up her salary. And that was precisely why Arsan felt at ease leaving Kunon in her care.

“Ah-ha-ha. Talk to Balen about money matters. He decides the servants’ pay.”

“Whaaat? Mr. Balen is such a miser! He’ll never agree.”

A more serious, sincere girl would have worried and moped alongside his son and only wound up depressed. And so Arsan had assigned the most cheerful maid he could find to the boy. He was certain that had been the right decision.

In two years’ time, he would start to have a few misgivings about his choice. But for the moment, at least, he was blissfully ignorant.



Chapter 3

Two Years On

Time is impartial.

Whether one is an aristocrat or a criminal, nothing is untouched by change.

The days and months marched on.

Time flew by without a care for people's hopes, personal circumstances, and everyday efforts.

"Another document has arrived."

"Mm-hmm."

Books, papers, manuscripts tied up with string, personal expense registers, and so on were spread over half the room, including the floor, to say nothing of the table. The materials were in the barest semblance of order, but the room's owner knew where everything was.

Approximately two years had passed since Kunon Gurion began devoting himself to magic.

He was nine years old.

Life itself had not changed much in two years.

Kunon still lived in the detached house. He still attended his general studies and magic classes in the mornings and practiced spells and swinging his staff in the afternoons. He also diligently performed his daily routine of preparing the family's baths.

The one major change was that Kunon had learned to read.

His efforts to achieve his dream—his ambition—continued with the support of his father, Arsan, his fiancée, Mirika, and his magic tutor, Jenié.

He was determined to gain vision through magic.

Success eluded him, but Kunon continued to hone his skills, refusing to give up.

The endless stream of books and materials mainly came from Mirika and Jenié. Still unsure of what effects anything might have, Kunon had asked them to send him every text they could find related to water magic, and he now set aside his evenings to read them.

Every day he would wake to find that he had fallen asleep at his table and been carried to bed by his maid.

"Have you found anything interesting?" Iko asked.

As she spoke, she set about tidying up the documents and books that Kunon had already looked over.

"Hmm? Ah yes..."

Kunon, his next book in hand, thought back over the things he'd been learning.

"Hydromancy, pyromancy, crystallization and vitrification, familiars, demon contracts, water lotus magic, magic mirrors, water mirrors, rainbow-colored fish scales...to list a few things I'm curious about."

Though he'd mentioned them, familiars and demon contracts were out of the question. Kunon would be lying if he said he had no interest, but the costs and risks were too high, so he decided to avoid them.

"When you say 'hydromancy,' is that like fortune-telling?"

“That’s right. Hydromancy, or water divination, involves pouring water into a vessel that’s been imbued with magic and looking inside for answers to your question. For example, where something you’ve lost has gone or what the future will be like. That kind of thing.”

“Oh, then could you use it to find my lost youth or the sparkle in my eyes?”

“No need. You’re still young and in your prime, Iko.”

“Come now, you know I’m getting on in years.”

“Not at all. I’m telling you, there isn’t another servant in this world as pretty as you.”

“You little liar, you can’t even see me!”

The pair laughed together.

While opinions about Kunon were still split down the middle, the past two years had seen the boy become a much more cheerful person.

The key to his transformation was magic. That was all it had taken to brighten his outlook. He’d gained muscle, improved his cold relationship with his fiancée, and even earned a bigger allowance. Everything was looking up.

“Then could you find me a husband with whatever-mancy?”

“Don’t worry. No man could ignore a good woman like you, Iko. Ahhh, if I wasn’t the second son of a marquess, I would have made you my wife...”

“Come on, what are you saying?! Talking about someone over ten years your senior like that!”

They laughed again.

For better or worse, it seemed Kunon had grown a little *too* cheerful.

“Yes, well done!”

Originally, Kunon had begun swinging a staff to build strength and endurance. But Master Ouro of the Eastern Tiger school had eventually started teaching him swordplay as well.

As it turned out, Kunon surprisingly had an aptitude for it.

“You’re very skilled, young master. Against another child your age, you’d put up quite a fight.”

“Really? Even though I can’t see?”

“Certainly. You’re doing very well. Your intuition is strong even without your sight, and when push comes to shove, I think you could do quite well.”

Truthfully, Kunon wasn’t learning *real* swordplay. This was more like a staff technique. And it was not intended for use against an opponent, so it was pretty far removed from typical sword fighting.

But Kunon, due to his unique circumstances, thought what he was doing was normal. He didn’t know it, but he was learning a whole new, slightly unconventional style.

“Listen up. This may seem monotonous, but once you master the basic movements, the application will follow. Just keep repeating the basics until they become second nature—until you can do them in your sleep. One you’ve done that, you might just be able to use a bit of that power in battle. Master those movements thoroughly so you won’t regret it when the time comes.”

“Yes.”

Kunon, barely listening as he gave his reply, repeated the sequence of movements again and again.

“Thus, when building settlements for the people, we must prioritize good sources of water above all else.”

“Splendid. Let’s end today’s lesson there.”

Baroness Flora Garden, too, remained as Kunon’s private tutor.

The boy had already completed all the courses taught at the school for noble children and was currently in the process of reviewing that information.

After one or two more sessions, Lady Flora expected her employment in the Gurion household would be over. She had started the job at the request of Lady Tinalisa—but now that the end was nigh, Flora felt her chest constrict.

After all, she had known the Kunon from two years ago.

“Iko, some tea, please,” said Kunon. “And today’s special for the lady.”

“Of course, the usual black tea, then.”

Kunon was so cheerful now—not a shadow of his former self remained.

Lady Flora had also been tasked with teaching Kunon behavior and manners befitting an aristocrat. However, the boy had been so depressed two years ago that Flora had held off on it. But then the opportunity had presented itself, and she had finally given him proper instruction.

It had all begun at Kunon’s request.

“I want you to teach me how to interact with Mirika.”

So Lady Flora taught him how to behave like a noble—or like a gentleman, as Kunon liked to put it.

“Like a gentleman with a good sense of humor, if possible,” his maid had chimed in.

A gentleman with a good sense of humor.

Lady Flora welcomed that idea herself. Tough guys and cool guys had their own sort of appeal, but an entertaining man who made the time fly by would be quite the catch. Besides, she thought, the former two types didn’t suit Kunon at all. The latter was most definitely the best option.

Her one concern was that such men were liable to be seen as frivolous—
“Lady Flora?”

“Yes?”

“A toast—to your eyes.”

“...Thank you.”

Scratch that. Kunon had *definitely* become frivolous. Then again, since he was still earnest at his core, perhaps it was more accurate to say he *appeared* frivolous. But to Lady Flora, who had known the old him, his new behavior was merely cute.

Maybe she had such empathy for Kunon because she had a child about his age. She wondered what would become of this boy who had completely turned

around his state of mind.

With her tutoring work about to come to an end, Lady Flora wouldn't be able to watch over his progress. She was both excited for him and anxious. Despite their difference in social status, the baroness cared for Kunon like her own, which only made her all the more emotional at their impending parting.

"This is a twelve-year-old vintage tea from the New Kingdom, worthy of a beautiful instructor such as yourself. It smells lovely, doesn't it?"

"Oh, that's incorrect, Master Kunon. This is a product of our kingdom—of Hughlia."

So what if the boy came off as a little frivolous? Flora's heart ached at the thought that their time together was almost up.



It happened on a day like any other.

"Master Kunon, your father wants to speak with you," Iko said from her seat at the dinner table.

"Hmm? Right now?"

Kunon was scanning through some reading materials, a sandwich in hand.

"He said you can finish dinner first."

His father, the head of the Gurion estate, had summoned him.

Kunon lived in his own detached house. His family would occasionally come to visit him there, but it was rare for him to be called to the main house.

"I wonder if I did something I shouldn't have..."

The last time he had been summoned was that summer.

As an experiment, he had sprayed colored water over a wide section of the garden. The area had been stained a deep red, as if it had been submerged in a sea of blood, and it had shocked and frightened both his family and the servants.

Kunon had finally managed to dye water and preserve its color without an

additional supply of magic power, and the experiment's purpose had been to discern the water's range and how long its effects would last. He had even gotten the gardener's permission for the experiment.

When the gardener saw the result, however, tears had welled up in his eyes, and he'd cried, "How did it end up like this...?" He had seemed more than a little surprised.

And when Kunon's father came home that night and saw the garden, so red even the darkness couldn't hide it, he'd summoned Kunon, alarmed and furious.

Kunon had been roundly scolded.

He'd told his father it was just a splash of colored water, no harm done—that it was only an experiment. But his father told him to put it back the way it was right away.

"I don't think you've done anything recently that would make him angry," said Iko. "You learned your lesson after the Sea of Blood Incident, didn't you? I got in trouble, too, even though I had nothing to do with it."

"You're the one who said we should do an experiment, Iko. You were definitely involved."

"I didn't think you would do something so garish!"

"Aren't you the one who told me to make it flashy?"

"You made it *too* flashy."

When it happened, they had passed the blame back and forth just like this in front of his father, which had inadvertently made him even angrier.

"But you know, I kind of liked it," Iko said at last.

"I did, too. Everyone was so surprised. You can't deny it really shook things up. That can be a good thing now and then."

If nothing else, he'd obtained valuable data: When people encountered a sea of blood without warning, they were surprised. That information alone was enough to satisfy Kunon.

It seemed he really had become a bit *too* cheerful.

After dinner, Kunon headed for the main house with Iko.

“It’s cold,” he remarked.

It was only a short distance to the house, so they walked. The path there was paved with smooth flagstones wide enough for a single person, so that Kunon could use the path without difficulty. He strolled along, feeling the way with his cane.

Winter was here.

Due to the season and the late hour, the wind blowing about them was freezing.

Kunon didn’t pay attention to things like calendars and seasons, day and night. But at times like these, he couldn’t help being reminded.

“Could you make one of those things, please?” Iko asked. “You know the ones.”

“Hmm? Oh.”

With a snap of his fingers, Kunon produced two A-ori, each about the size of a person’s head.

One floated in front of Kunon’s face, blocking the wind. The other hung in the air in front of Iko, who trailed behind him.

“It’s so *warm*. And squishy.”

Iko hugged the sphere to herself, pressing her face against it.

By altering the A-ori to make them slightly warmer than human skin and give them an ultra-flexible membrane, he was able to create a simple heat pack.

Iko loved it. She said it felt great to touch this miraculous soft sphere of water that merely changed shape when squeezed. Mirika loved it, too. It seemed this kind of A-ori was very popular with the ladies—yet another thing Kunon had learned.

In the summer, he would alter his spheres to have a lower temperature. Everyone—not just women—seemed to like that one. Or at least, they found it

convenient.

“Master Kunon, we’ve been expecting you.”

“Mm.”

The family’s elderly butler, Balen, had been waiting at the entrance of the main house and led them inside. Kunon quickly dispelled the A-ori.



They headed for the drawing room. When old Balen knocked and announced Kunon's arrival, a voice from inside answered, "Come in."

Kunon was on his own now. Leaving the butler and Iko behind, he stepped into the room.

"You called for me, Father...? Oh, Mother and Brother are here, too?"

Every member of the Gurion family was present: his father, Arsan, his mother, Tinalisa, and even his elder brother, Ixio.

His parents visited him about once a week, but it had been a while since he'd seen his brother. Kunon knew, though—while they didn't spend time together, Ixio came by the detached house sometimes to check on him.

According to Iko, when they were little, Ixio had taken Kunon out to play, but Kunon had fallen and gotten injured. Ever since then, Ixio hadn't known how to interact with his little brother.

In that moment, his brother's young mind had finally understood what it meant to be unable to see. But Kunon had completely forgotten the incident. He had hurt himself falling so many times that it was impossible to remember or care about them all.

"Kunon. Sit down."

"Of course."

Kunon took the seat next to his brother as naturally as if he could see.

After thorough training, Kunon could now identify almost all the colors in a room of this size. His parents were directly across the table from him, and his brother was at his side.

"Have you finished learning the noble school's curriculum?"

"Yes. Lady Flora said I completed it."

Once he'd mastered his letters, Kunon began to soak up knowledge at an incredible speed. For his part, Kunon simply wanted to get through the bothersome topics quickly so he could concentrate on practicing magic.

"I know I've asked before, but do you have any intention to go to school?"

“I don’t. It would only cause trouble for the people around me.”

Everyone already fussed over him at home. Kunon felt that if he had to deal with it elsewhere, it would be too much.

Or at least, that’s how he used to feel.

He could probably attend school normally with how he was now. But since school wasn’t his priority, he now had a different reason for not attending.

“Have I told you? You’re actually registered at school already, Kunon.”

“Ah yes. You didn’t tell me, but I heard it from Lady Flora.”

Something like that had come up during his lessons.

“You could go to school anytime, you know. Won’t you?” the baroness had said. She must have thought Kunon could handle it now, as well.

Of course, he’d told her he had no intention to do so.

“If I remember correctly,” he said, “don’t the children of nobles have an obligation to attend?”

“That’s right,” his father replied. “Well, considering your circumstances, His Majesty has given you special permission not to. At this point, I, too, feel there’s no need for you to go. You should do what you want.”

His father was showing his support. He was probably assisting Kunon in other ways the boy didn’t even realize.

“However, I want you to think about it a little.”

“Is this because of how I use my allowance?” Kunon asked.

“No, it’s not about that.”

“You always object to it, Father, and it may seem wasteful. But I believe I put the money to use thoughtfully.”

“Like I said, I’m not talking about money.”

“Father, thank you so much for always working hard for our family. I’m so grateful.”

“Enough already! Drop it!”

“I’m sorry I made the garden into a sea of blood.”

“This isn’t about that, either. But if you do it again, I’ll suspend your allowance for two months!”

Kunon shuddered. Those were not words he wanted to hear.

Neither Arsan’s threat to suspend Kunon’s allowance nor his son’s trembling reaction had any relation to the topic at hand.

“Darling, calm down,” Tinalisa said soothingly.

Her husband had gotten unusually riled up, but now he sighed as if to expel his irritation.

“...I’m actually talking about Princess Mirika,” he said at last.

Kunon frowned. Why was his fiancée coming up now? What did Mirika have to do with his going to school or not getting his allowance?

“You may not understand this yet, but as her fiancé, you must fulfill certain aristocratic duties. Those who fail to perform their duties or behave in ways ill-suited to their station become vulnerable in high society. Kunon, if Princess Mirika became an object of ridicule because of you, how would that make you feel?”

“...I see. So that’s how it is.”

At present, his and Mirika’s relationship was going very well.

Two years ago, when they had first become engaged, things had been strained. But now they recognized each other as future marriage partners. Kunon, at least, had no reason to reject her.

“Your mother and I have decided that you are now capable of performing your aristocratic duties.”

His father had discussed the matter with his mother before making a decision. It was something they wouldn’t have said—couldn’t have said—to the Kunon of the past. They had believed Kunon would spend the rest of his life confined to this house, with no desire or intention to venture out into the world.

But circumstances had changed.

The Gurion estate was now too cramped for the person Kunon had become. He was already gathering up information about the outside world every chance he got.

He used up his allowance every month without fail, and his father knew that when the money ran out, Kunon would appeal to his mother until she gave him a little more.

One day, Kunon's magic would take him far away from the family home. That day might arrive sooner or later, but it would definitely come. It was that eventuality that had prompted the current conversation.

School could provide an opportunity for Kunon to leave the estate, and Arsan's suggestion had been made with that in mind.

Socializing was essential in the outside world. And so, if possible, Kunon should fulfill his duties as a noble. That was the point his father wanted to make.

"Aristocratic duties, huh...? And that's why want me to go?"

Kunon had no desire to attend school. He truly didn't understand what his parents were thinking, either. Unsurprisingly, it was difficult for a nine-year-old child to grasp the rules of high society and his parents' feelings about them.

Nevertheless, Kunon thought the matter over. Bothersome as it was, if doing this would someday benefit Mirika, Kunon felt he could accept it.

His goal to gain his sight was still a work in progress, and he hated to think of abandoning his current lifestyle. But for Mirika's sake, he could handle a little detour—

"No. As I said before, I don't think it's necessary that you attend."

Just as Kunon was about to mournfully accept the proposal, his father changed course slightly.

"I want you to take the advancement exams," he said.

"Advancement exams?"

"The school for nobles is attended by children between the ages of six and fourteen, but there's no fixed length of attendance. As long as you pass all the

advancement exams, you graduate. There are students who finish only a few days after entering, while others learn slowly and carefully.”

Kunon summed up what he was hearing in his head.

If he passed these advancement exams, he wouldn't have to attend school. Lady Flora said he had learned everything taught there. In other words, Kunon should already have the ability to pass the exams. That was why his father was saying to forget about school and just take the tests. He must be sure Kunon would pass.

“There are five advancement exams. If Ixio passes his next one, he'll graduate.”

“Wow, Brother is graduating already?”

Ixio had been going to school since he was seven. His elder brother was eleven now, so he had been in school for four years.

Kunon unconsciously turned to face Ixio, and his brother added, “Princess Mirika will also be done once she passes the next exam. I think she'll probably graduate with me.”

Even if it was only for a few days, Ixio wanted to go to school with his younger brother.

After graduating, he would enter the senior-level school the following spring. As the family's heir, Ixio would then help out with their father's work as he prepared to succeed. And since Kunon was bound for magic school, this would be their last chance to go together.

“I see... Then is it okay if I join you? I'm not sure if I'll be able to graduate at the same time, but...”

Kunon had never been to school, and he had never taken an exam. But if Lady Flora said he'd learned everything, then he probably had some hope of passing. And if he failed, he could worry about that when the time came. He felt optimistic.

The old, withdrawn Kunon probably wouldn't even have dared to try.

“What?! You're going to school?!”

Several days had passed since Kunon had spoken with his family, and he was sharing the news with Mirika. She had come to visit, fulfilling her duty of meeting her fiancé once every two weeks.

“Yes. Although, I’ll only be taking some advancement exams.”

“Oh my goodness! That’s wonderful! That means I’ll get to experience school life with you!”

“You think so? To be honest, I’m a little confused about the whole thing.”

Kunon could tell Mirika was excited. He was aware of how enthusiastically she was petting the cat he’d made from water, but he didn’t know anything about what so-called school life entailed.

“Don’t worry!” she said. “You can count on me to show you around!”

Mirika was a couple of years Kunon’s senior, and she’d begun acting more and more like his elder sister over the past two years.

“Oh, well, if you don’t mind,” he replied.

“Of course, leave it to me!”

“But I’m worried, you know.”

“Huh...? What about?”

“Well, if I go to school with you, won’t all the boys with crushes on you get jealous?”

“Huh, oh... Um, ah..... I think it’ll be fine...”

Mirika didn’t know how to respond. She hesitated, a little embarrassed.

“Oh? Could it be that you aren’t very popular...?”

“How dare you! I’m popular! I’m a princess, you know! There are as many boys who like me as there are fingers on my right hand!”

At least five, in other words.

Kunon couldn’t say if that was a lot of boys or not, but he made up his mind.

He had been half joking, but it sounded like there was a real chance someone would bear a grudge against him. So just in case, Kunon decided to bring his

fighting cane to school.



At last, the day came for Kunon to attend school.

“Well, don’t you look smart! Master Kunon, could you be the original prince who comes riding in on a white horse?!”

In response to Iko’s ridiculous compliments, Kunon adjusted the glittering bow tie that sparkled around his neck and made a bold declaration.

“It seems my true identity has finally been exposed. My apologies for keeping it secret until now.”

Ixio watched his little brother and the maid with a strange expression.

Is this really what my little brother is like? he wondered.

“Hello, Brother. It is I, Kunon, the original fairy-tale prince.”

“...Uh, sure.”

Ixio wasn’t expecting to be addressed so suddenly. Bewildered, he was unable to give a clever reply.

Kunon had spoken to Mirika about attending school a few days after the family meeting. Since then, several more days had passed, and at last the fateful morning had arrived.

Their father had discussed matters with the school and fine-tuned Kunon’s schedule. Their mother had been suppressing all her love and worry for Kunon, and now she was fussing over him like mad, letting it all out at once. She had even prepared formal wear for his first-ever appearance in public. He looked fit to appear at some sort of fete.

To be fair, the outfit wasn’t that strange for a noble. If one thought of today as Kunon’s school entrance ceremony, this level of dolling up was understandable. There would be no actual ceremony, of course.

Kunon had come to the main house early in the morning, where their mother had changed his clothes and done his hair.

Ixio was waiting at the entrance with Iko. He decided not to comment on his brother's appearance, figuring such things were inevitable. More importantly, it had been quite some time since he had gotten the chance to speak openly with his brother, so Ixio was a little nervous.

"Travel safe."

Tinalisa had tears in her eyes. It truly felt like a miracle to be sending off both her sons at once. She watched as they boarded the carriage together.

"Oh, wait." Kunon suddenly got back out. "All set now. We're off, Mother."

He had covered the carriage wheels with strong, flexible A-ori that acted as cushioning, before climbing back into the coach. This was a trick Kunon had devised some time ago for their father to minimize the jolting of his carriage, which made Arsan's back hurt.

"Magic sure is useful," remarked Ixio.

"Yep. So useful that even I should be able to find a job," said Kunon.

I don't think you'll have much trouble, thought his brother.

The carriage started forward, gliding across the ground.

"Hey... Are you sure you aren't nervous?"

Ixio broke the silence. Kunon was facing the window, even though he couldn't see beyond it.

"Hmm?"

Kunon turned his unseeing eyes on his brother.

He was wearing a fashionable leather eye mask that day. He couldn't see either way, but the outside air tended to dry out his eyes. Plus, it hurt if bugs or dust got in them.

"It must be hard to be blind," said Ixio.

"It is. But I don't worry so much anymore."

"Really?"

"Yep. Because I'm a bit stronger now."

His reasoning was simple and straightforward. To be sure, gaining strength gave one confidence, and with confidence came bravery.

Ixio couldn't help feeling strange about his brother's new attitude, since he knew how he had been before. But he had no doubt if he spent more time with the current, cheerful Kunon that he would soon get over that strangeness.

"You worried about me a lot, didn't you? You blamed yourself because I fell and got hurt, right? But I'm fine now. I used to think I wanted to die, but now I want to live no matter what."

"...Right. Okay."

Kunon *had* grown stronger, in both body and mind.

"I have the strength of will to outlive everyone else in the world. So I'm sorry, but don't worry, Brother. I intend to live. I'm going to live so long I'll start to feel guilty."

"...Well, okay, then."

Once again, Ixio couldn't help wondering—was this really what his brother was like?

For better or worse, magic had changed Kunon.

He was different now.

Ixio thought on this for a moment.

He suspected the negative changes were the fault of his brother's maid... No, he was *sure* of it.

The uncharacteristically smooth carriage ride came to an end as the coach rolled serenely to a stop in front of the school.

Along the way, the two brothers had filled their free time by chatting about various topics. There was so much more for them to talk about, but they'd have to put that aside for now.

"Can I give you a hand?"

Ixio got out of the carriage first, then asked if he could help his brother. But Kunon shook his head and replied, "No need."

Kunon descended the steps of the coach as if he could see just fine. He clearly didn't need any assistance.

"Kunon! Ixio!"

As the carriage left again for home, a girl ran up to them. It was Mirika. Because Kunon was starting school that day, she had been waiting at the gate for him.

"Good morning, Your Highness," said Kunon. "What a pleasure to hear your beautiful voice so early in the morning. I'm sure I could go on about my good fortune for half the day."

"Good morning, Kunon. Your bow tie is cute."

"Isn't it? ...Oh? Is it even cuter than Your Highness, by chance?"

"Absolutely not."

"Good. If you had said yes, I would have torn it off and thrown it away here and now."

Kunon had changed dramatically in two years, and Mirika had become totally accustomed to his frivolous talk and jokes. Consequently, she was able to go along with his banter quite easily.

"Good morning, Your Highness," said Ixio.

He thought the two of them were simply amazing. Kunon was part of Ixio's family, but Mirika was obviously much closer to him. As the two of them were engaged, Ixio figured that was probably a good thing.

And just like that, Kunon began his first day attending the Kingdom of Hughlia's school for noble children.

Kunon could feel the presence and hear the voices of a huge number of people.

Up until now, Kunon had only known the Gurion family's town house here in the royal capital and their mansion out in the family domain. As a result, this was his first time among such a large group of people.

The old me would have recoiled from such a situation, he thought.

“Your Highness, is it all right if I play the part of the lady just for now?”

“Hee-hee... Then I’ll be the gentleman. Lovely young miss, your hand, please.”

Mirika took Kunon’s left hand and assumed the role of his escort.

“...”

They really are close, Ixio thought as he watched them.

Since they were at a school for the nobility, quite a few students were engaged. But among them, Kunon and Mirika appeared to get along especially well. Perhaps because they looked so at home nestled up to each other.

“Shall we?” Mirika said.

“Please,” Kunon replied. “Brother, let’s go.”

“S-sure.”

Mirika led the way, and Kunon followed after her.

Kunon was dressed for an evening party. Besides his leather eye mask, he had an ornate staff in his right hand and a princess—ninth in rank but still highly respected—holding his left. And trailing after him like an attendant was the next marquess of the Gurion family.

Kunon stood out so spectacularly that he caught the eye of every student and servant around him. Nevertheless, he strode confidently through the school’s front gate, allowing himself to be led by the hand and utterly unbothered by all the stares.

He moved so boldly that even the teacher who had been waiting to greet him and show him around could only watch, dumbfounded, as he passed.

“Wait, please! Mr. Kunon Gurion!”

The teacher—Professor Kast—chased after the three students who had just passed her by. She had been tasked with greeting and looking after the blind second son of the marquess. She’d been forced to accept this duty, and she had the feeling it was going to be nothing but trouble.

Differences in social status weren’t acknowledged at the school, but Kast, only two years on the job and from the family of a baron, was a little daunted.

Moreover, things were turning out very differently than she'd pictured. She had been told to expect a timid child. And yet the boy in question cut a figure so imposing that he seemed like a prince, and Kast had accidentally let him walk right past her.

The child looked so stately that she began to doubt that he was Kunon Gurion, or even that he was blind. His presence was simply that unexpectedly grand.

"Yes?"

Kunon, Mirika, and Ixio all turned to face her.

The boy in question's clothing and cane were one thing, but the covering over his eyes was of particular note. It seemed irrefutable proof of his blindness.

"My name is Kast, and I teach at this school. I'm here to welcome you."

"Oh, is that so? It's a pleasure to meet you, Professor Kast. My name is Kunon Gurion. I'm a lady right now, so I'll curtsy."

"Huh? ...What was that?"

Kunon spread an invisible skirt and drew back his left leg in a perfect curtsy, just as a lady would do.

"...What? A lady, you say?"

Maybe there was a clerical error?

Kast had been told he was a boy, and he was dressed like a boy, but perhaps he was really a girl?

"Biologically, I'm a boy. By nature as well. But just for now I'm a beautiful young lady."

What kind of nonsense was this child spewing? And why a "beautiful" young lady? ...Not that he wasn't cute, but still.

Kast wasn't sure what was going on, so Ixio whispered to her, "He's playing around. Please don't mind it." In the end, she decided she would have to give in.

Kunon was so unbelievably bold that it was difficult to discern whether he

was joking or being serious. He must be the type of person one could never take seriously or speak earnestly with.

That was a good thing for Kast to know from the start.

“Miss Mirika, I’ll be looking after him from here.”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

Mirika was due for class, and Kunon had an exam to take. They would need to go their separate ways.

“Then let’s have lunch together, Kunon, okay?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Brother, you too.”

“Yeah. See you at lunch.”

Mirika and Ixio headed for the main building, while Kunon, led by Kast, made his way to a special classroom.

The special classroom was a small space designed for students and teachers to meet one-on-one.

“Do you understand what you’re here for?”

Kast was standing at a podium, while Kunon had taken a seat.

“Yes,” he replied. “I was told that if I pass five advancement exams, I’ll graduate.”

“That’s correct. Most students graduate from this school in three to five years. The advancement exams review what students learn in half-year to one-year periods. The exams aren’t that difficult if students pay attention in class, but if a student fails an exam, they can’t retake it for another month. Do you understand so far?”

Kunon nodded.

“In short,” he began, “if you pass one exam, you can continue on to the next, but if you fail, you have to wait a month before taking the exam again, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. Typically, students must wait several days after passing an exam to take the next one, but special measures have been set up in your case, Mr. Kunon, so that you can take one each day. Your father and His Majesty

discussed the matter and decided there was no reason for you to attend school in the first place, and this was their proposed solution.”

Special circumstances like this weren’t rare, and the school was used to such arrangements.

“Professor,” said Kunon.

“Yes?”

“My father and His Majesty are very close friends apparently. Thick as thieves. I’m sorry that they pressured the school.”

“...Yes, I see. I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear that, okay?”

Favoritism was another thing the school was used to. Considering the various ties among noble families, it was only natural. That was the nature of high society.

Such things weren’t talked about openly, but everyone knew. It was like an unspoken agreement.

“Do you have any questions? I’ll be monitoring you for the entirety of today’s exam, so feel free to ask me anything.”

“Professor,” Kunon said again.

“Yes?”

“Father and His Majesty are basically best—”

“If there are no questions, we’ll start the exam right away. And please stop trying to drag your teacher into political danger, understood?”

“Yes. I’m ready to begin.”

Kast was at her wit’s end.

Kunon had spent the entire morning period on his exam and completed it successfully.

Knowing he couldn’t see, Kast had wondered how he would take the test. She had been told not to worry about it, and she soon understood why, though the *how* still eluded her.

Kunon had gone through his written exam so easily it was hard to believe he was blind.

Just moments ago, Mirika and Ixio had come to pick him up and take him to the dining hall.

He was done with tests for the day, and his next exam wouldn't be until the next day. If things went smoothly, he would graduate in four days. But that was only if things went smoothly.

"...I just don't get it..." Kast said to herself.

Someone else would handle the scoring, so Kast only skimmed over his answer sheet, but...as far as she could tell, everything was correct.

The boy had continued making strange comments throughout his exam. Kunon, demeanor aside, seemed to only speak in frivolities, and yet, his answers were so flawless that Kast found it hard to believe. Plus, his handwriting was beautiful. She began to feel ashamed of her own writing and its little peculiarities.

Kunon's answer sheet was inexplicably perfect.



"Brother Lyle..."

Kunon couldn't see.

Consequently, he was fairly sensitive to changes in his surroundings.

It was his third day at school. The exams were easy, he was in a new environment, and he was having a pretty fun time. Kunon was almost convinced he would've enjoyed attending school normally.

However, he was learning that large groups of people came with a mix of many different beliefs and ways of thinking.

Though things had been peaceful so far, Kunon had a feeling that peace was about to be spoiled.

Approximately six other students were standing in front of Kunon, Mirika, and Ixio in the cafeteria. The rest of the lunchroom was thrumming with activity, but

the air around them had fallen dead silent—the congenial mood overwritten by a rising tension.

And then Mirika had said the word *brother*. It seemed someone connected to her was involved.

“Mirika. Is that kid your fiancé?”

The speaker sounded like a young boy but with a large build. His voice was intimidating, and its condescending tone reeked of arrogance.

Regardless of who it was, it stood to reason that if Mirika didn’t like him, Kunon wouldn’t, either.

“Prince Lyle, did you need something?” Ixio asked, moving in front of Kunon as if to protect him.

If his brother hadn’t stepped forward, Kunon might have done so himself. Instead, he decided to sit back and see how Ixio took care of the problem.

“Watch it, Gurion. I didn’t give you permission to speak. Learn some respect.”

“I believe we are to leave social rank behind at school— Hmm...?”

“Wha...?”

Leaving things up to others wasn’t really Kunon’s style, though.

He was hungry, and his time at school with Mirika and Ixio was limited and extremely precious. He wasn’t about to let anybody get in his way. Besides, whoever this person was, he made Mirika and Ixio nervous, so he probably wasn’t very nice.

Kunon broke a water sphere down until it was invisible, then concentrated all the droplets into a single spot on the pants of the large boy who had been speaking.

The water soaked into the boy’s pants, and a stain appeared.

“Huh? ...What’s that?!”

Ixio saw it first. Then Mirika. The boy in question seemed to catch on from their reactions.

Then Kunon remarked coolly, “Oh my. I think he peed his pants.”

A commotion broke out.

The people around them had been keeping their distance so as not to get involved. But now they started murmuring loudly in disbelief.

“N-no! He’s wrong! I did n-no such thing!”

The boy covered the wet part of his pants with both hands, shaken.

Only Mirika and Ixio knew: *Ah, this is Kunon’s doing.*

“Hey, Kunon...”

“Kunon...”

The nuisance had gone. The boy and his gang seemed to have decided there was nothing they could do to regain the upper hand and had hightailed it away as quickly as possible.

At last, Ixio and Mirika turned to look at the person responsible.

“Brother, what are you going to eat?” asked Kunon. “I’m going to have hamburger steak!”

“Wait a sec, Kunon,” said Ixio. “That was you, right?”

“What will you be having, Princess? I’m thinking hamburger steak for me!”

“...Well, it’s Kunon, after all. It won’t matter what we say.”

Ixio was surprised to hear what seemed like resignation in Mirika’s voice. *So she sees him that way, too?* he thought.

He’d been under the impression she and Kunon were surprisingly alike, but it seemed Kunon was a little more “out there.” It was possible Ixio had underestimated the extent of his brother’s transformation.

It seemed Kunon had become much, *much* stronger and more spirited than he’d imagined.

At this point, Ixio was beginning to wonder if Kunon had surpassed such adjectives and was turning into something else entirely. What that something else might be, Ixio was still unsure.

“So, who was that?”

The three of them sat down at an empty table in the cafeteria, which had now regained its pleasant atmosphere.

Kunon, after a change of heart, had ordered a sandwich. He got his hamburger steak between two pieces of bread.

Once he could discern colors, Kunon had learned proper table manners and could now eat things like soup and salad without issue. Nevertheless, sandwiches were still the easiest for him, and he preferred to relax during his meals.

“That was my brother, Sixth Prince Lyle Hughlia. He’s a year older than me,” Mirika answered.

They didn’t think of each other as siblings, since their mothers were different. But without a doubt, their father was one and the same.

For generations, the rulers of the Kingdom of Hughlia had produced numerous children. The reason behind the practice was unclear, but it was said to be due to the higher birth rate of valuable sorcerers within the royal family.

And well, there was a little royal blood in the Gurion family, too, so that theory seemed decently credible.

However, precisely because the royal family had so many children, those born later received little attention. Heirs up to third in line for the throne were afforded special care, but those of lower rank who lacked magic were treated about the same as ordinary noble children.

Mirika and Lyle went without guards at school, and though palace life was often thought of as glamorous, theirs was surprisingly modest. Even their allowance was fairly average.

“What?” said Kunon. “Was that really your elder brother, Your Highness? Like Ixio is to me?”

“Yes. We have different mothers, but he is officially my brother.”

“That can’t be.”

“It’s true. Why do you think it isn’t?”

“Don’t all elder brothers cherish their younger sisters?”

“...I wish that were so.”

“...Can it be? Brother, is Her Highness telling the truth?”

“She is.”

Ixio, who had lost some of his appetite due to his brother's mischief, had ordered a light beef stew, salad, and bread. He'd still asked for a large helping of the stew, however.

If Kunon was found out, there would definitely be trouble. Ixio desperately hoped it wouldn't come to light, at least until after his brother graduated.

“So it's true... I see. Then I've made a mistake. If he's Princess Mirika's elder brother, then he's mine, too.”

That was certainly true in theory, and Ixio was relieved to see that his brother was still capable of serious feelings and consideration for other people. Kunon was clearly something of an oddball, but Ixio took solace in the fact that he still had proper human emotions.

“I see... Then why did Brother-in-law block our path so uncouthly, with such open ferocity and malice?”

“Don't talk about him like he's a wild monster...,” Ixio said, only to be ignored.

“It's probably because I've moved up in the world,” said Mirika. “He must have come to keep me in check.”

“Moved up? In check?”

“Yes. My fiancé is a sorcerer, on top of having the Hero's Scar. Thanks to you, my position in the royal family has rapidly improved. If that was all, he probably wouldn't have cared, but... Kunon, this is your debut, right? From now on, our positions in society will improve... Brother Lyle probably hates being inferior to me.”

That said, according to Mirika, small changes in the rank of princes and princesses at their level meant very little.

“It's all quite complicated, isn't it?” said Kunon.

“It is. But there's really no need to worry. For the crown prince...or those first

or second in the line of succession, there are various obligations. But Brother Lyle and I don't hold much value for the royal family."

Kunon didn't understand anything about royalty or nobility or high society. Why would he? He hadn't intended to have anything to do with it. Even his tutors had passed on only the bare minimum of information on the subject. He wouldn't even have come to school if his father hadn't convinced him that not doing so would make him vulnerable in the future.

Without a doubt, there were elements at play here beyond Kunon's understanding. But for now, there was a more pressing issue.

"I think I should apologize to Brother-in-law."

"“Absolutely not.”"

Mirika and Ixio rejected Kunon's idea immediately.

It was better if the two of them never crossed paths again. Though they hadn't consulted each other, both Mirika and Ixio had reached the same conclusion.

No one could say what mayhem Kunon might cause if he met Lyle for a second time. The prospect was truly terrifying.

"Huh? Why?"

The only one who didn't understand was Kunon.



Kunon successfully passed the first four advancement exams.

At last, the fifth exam—the one that would determine his graduation—had arrived.

This was the only exam he would take together with Mirika and Ixio. For the first and likely the last time, the three of them would be doing the same thing, in the same classroom, at the same school.

"It won't be just the three of us, you know," said Ixio. "There'll be about twenty people taking the exam at once."

“Oh, I see,” said Kunon. “Of course. There are more students than teachers, so that makes sense. It wouldn’t be efficient for everyone to take it individually like I did, would it?”

“Exactly.”

This might also be the last time Kunon rode in the carriage together with Ixio. Whether it happened again would depend on the results of the exam.

“That means Professor Kast won’t be monitoring this test, huh? And just when I’d finally gotten her to open up...”

Kast had been under the impression she would take turns with the other teachers monitoring Kunon’s exams. But in the end, she looked after him all four days. She’d been made to take care of the whole thing from start to finish.

Even though the school wasn’t supposed to recognize status differences, disparities in treatment based on social status happened all the same.

“Open up?” asked Ixio.

“Yeah. We talked about a bunch of stuff. Professor Kast graduated from the senior school for nobles on a scholarship before taking her current teaching job. It sounds like a man she had a thing for said he wanted to be a teacher, and she was aiming to chase after him. The thing is, the man failed the exam and went back home in tears, and Kast passed it alone and got a job. That was two years ago.”

“...I see.”

That was quite a lot of *opening up*. What on earth was a teacher doing telling such things to a child?

“Apparently, she’s in the market for a boyfriend. Brother, it’s your chance. You might be able to woo her if you give it a try.”

“...I’ll consider it.”

As the Gurion brothers chatted away, the carriage carried them to their destination.

“Good morning, Kunon. Good morning, Ixio.”

Once again, they met up with Mirika in front of the school gate. Then, for the first time, they headed off to the same classroom together.

Just as Ixio had said, about twenty students were gathered in the exam room.

“Princess Mirika, please introduce us to your fiancé.”

“Ixio, introduce us to your little brother.”

It seemed that Mirika’s and Ixio’s acquaintances were also taking the exam, and Kunon found himself surrounded by seven boys and girls he didn’t recognize.

“I’m Kunon Gurion, Ixio Gurion’s younger brother,” Kunon said, introducing himself. “I’m relieved, to be honest. Brother and Mirika haven’t introduced me to anyone, and I was beginning to wonder if the two of them had any friends or acquaintances at all.”

“That’s rude, you know! You can insult me, but you should be more considerate of Her Highness!”

“He’s right! You’re being very rude! I asked everyone to leave us alone, so I could spend time with you!”

The two of them were indignant, but Kunon was happy regardless.

“Thank you for being so considerate. But it’s true I was worried. Even I couldn’t bring myself to ask if you had no friends—or if you spent all your time at school alone. It wouldn’t do to joke about something like that...”

Kunon pressed down on his eye covering at the inner corners of his eyes.

“Thank goodness... I’m so glad Mirika has friends, and Brother isn’t all alone...”

“Kunon...”

“I’m really glad I didn’t have to comfort you by talking about myself, saying it’s fine not having friends.”

Kunon was implying he himself was friendless, and Mirika’s and Ixio’s classmates felt their hearts quake.

They were deeply touched. They had heard that Kunon, unable to see since

birth, was a lonely boy who rarely left home and couldn't attend school. The friends whose presence they took for granted were something Kunon had never known. As they pondered this, someone spoke up.

"I don't think it really bothers you, does it?" said Mirika, delivering these heartless words with a straight face. Kunon just nodded casually.

"A person can do surprisingly well on their own, you know. Ah-ha-ha!"

"I thought you would say that, Kunon. Hee-hee."

Mirika's and Ixion's friends were at a loss. But Kunon and the princess seemed closer than they had thought and appeared to be having fun, so everyone decided to let the matter go.

"Hey! Mirika!"

Surrounded by their mystified friends and laughing to themselves, Kunon and Mirika were rudely interrupted.

"Oh, Brother Lyle."

It was Mirika's elder brother, the one they had run into the other day in the cafeteria. Apparently, he would be taking the graduation exam with them as well.

A bolt of tension shot through not only the area around Kunon, but the entire classroom.

Lyle didn't have a particularly good reputation. Frankly, people hated him. He was unruly, had a big ego, was shielded by the might of the royal family, and didn't listen to what the teachers had to say.

In many ways, he was considered a nuisance and a problem child. There was even a rumor that he had banded together with a group of like-minded ruffians and would go around doing some pretty awful things even a child wouldn't normally get away with.

He was someone to avoid at all costs—and yet...

"Brother-in-law!"

Kunon rushed over to Lyle, who had forced his way into their little group, and

took his hand.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Brother-in-law! I’m Princess Mirika’s fiancé, Kunon Gurion! I’m so glad I got to introduce myself! Because of the commotion, I wasn’t able to the other day!”

“Wh-wh-what the hell, kid! What is *with* you?!”

Lyle tried to shake Kunon off, but the boy wouldn’t let go of his hand. He was surprisingly strong for a small child of nine.

“Come now, I’m your brother-in-law, you know! Oh, what a manly voice you have! I’m sure your face is manly, too! If my eyes could see, I would surely gaze at it for hours, ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!”

“H-hey... Hey, Mirika! What is up with this kid?! What’s his deal?!”

Lyle was baffled. No one had ever been so friendly upon first meeting him, no matter what the reason. He had no idea how to respond.

“Hee, hee-hee, hee-hee-hee...”

“Pffft...”

“What the?! What are you guys laughing at?!”

Lyle’s usual arrogant bad boy persona had vanished, and his face was bright red with frustration and embarrassment. He looked oddly adorable as he struggled, unable to turn Kunon away.

Lyle finally looked like the twelve-year-old he was.

It seemed Kunon was strong, indeed. And his strength came in many forms.

After that, Kunon, Mirika, and Ixio—along with Mirika’s and Ixio’s friends plus Lyle—took the graduation exam and passed without incident.

With that, Kunon’s five days at the school for noble children came to an unremarkable close.



That day, Kunon was to have a magic lesson.

“Congratulations on graduating, Master Kunon.”

“Thank you, Miss Jenié.”

Jenié had been Kunon’s private magic tutor for two years. Like always, she met her pupil in the garden of the detached house to begin their lesson.

Just the other day, Kunon had successfully graduated from school, completing the bare minimum of his aristocratic duties. He didn’t think much about the future, but now at least, if he went out into society, the issue of his education wouldn’t be a problem.

After their usual magic drills were finished, Jenié turned to her student.

“Now seems like the right time, so I’d like to finally tell you the truth.”

“The truth?”

Kunon looked at Jenié. The gesture was pointless, since he was blind, but he couldn’t help himself.

The truth.

Such a phrase naturally put him on guard.

“Are you ready? I’m about to tell you something a bit shocking, okay?”

“This is so sudden. How could I be ready? ...Could it be that you’re actually the goddess of the night sky, and it’s time for you to return to the world of the gods...?”

“Would that it were so, but no... The truth is that I can’t teach you anymore, Master Kunon.”

“What?”

This was indeed a shock.

“I know I’ve mentioned quitting several times before. But no more clumsily avoiding the issue. I’ll be honest—I haven’t been able to teach you for some time.”

To protect her meager pride, Jenié had been a little more indirect in the past. But she had finally made up her mind.

“As I’ve said before, your father prohibited me from teaching you any high-level, dangerous magic. With that in mind, I’ve already taught you everything I

can. You are now considerably more skilled than I am. At your current level, I daresay that you would quickly surpass me at any new skill you learned.”

“That’s not true! And I loved the underhanded magic tricks you tried so hard to deceive me with after you ran out of things to teach!”

“Oh. So you realized how desperate I was. That saves me the trouble of having to explain.”

She had really been dragging things out.

With nothing new to teach, Jenié had been forced to come up with new lessons willy-nilly, recklessly scraping together whatever ideas she could.

It seemed Kunon had noticed.

But if he knew, why had he gone along so obediently? Jenié had no idea.

“Your ploys really expanded the range of my abilities! Those underhanded tricks of yours gave me a reason to live and taught me the true depth of magic!”

“If you really think that, please stop using the word *underhanded*. I might’ve tried to trick you, but I was desperate. I’m actually a bit hurt... Though to be honest, there were countless times in the past two years when I really struggled to keep up the charade.”

“No, you did fine!”

“I didn’t! I would know! You don’t know anything about me, Master Kunon! ... Well, I mean, clearly you do. Argh, this is such a pain...!”

Kunon *did* know, of course.

He’d seen through her strategy to prolong their lessons and keep getting paid.

“Are you quitting because of the salary?! Are you not being paid enough?!” he asked.

“No! It’s just the opposite! I can’t stand being paid so much for doing nothing!”

“I’ll ask my father to increase your salary! So please don’t quit!”

“I just told you! Being paid too much is part of the problem!”

Kunon was brilliant.

Jenié, however, was considered average among her fellow sorcerers.

It took no time at all for her to teach Kunon everything she could, and he had already surpassed her in the skills she'd taught him.

By now there was probably more Kunon could teach her.

Jenié was merely an average sorcerer. But that didn't mean she had no pride as a magic user. Meager though it was, that pride existed. And that was why she could no longer teach Kunon.

...In fact, she had discussed quitting many times, but Kunon kept persuading her to stay, and she'd given in again and again.

It was a hard-to-find job with great terms. Even if she had to struggle in vain, she didn't want to stop teaching Kunon. And she genuinely wished to watch over his progress. Plus, the salary was good, and the job itself was easy. She got a lot of days off, and the snacks served at the Gurion estate were delicious. As the guest in a noble household, she could experience a little taste of the high life.

In many ways, it was a difficult position to give up.

However, Jenié had reached her limit.

"Master Kunon!"

She grabbed the boy by both shoulders.

"You deserve a much more brilliant sorcerer than me as your teacher! I can't help you grow any further! I can't guide you! ...Honestly, I think I've already helped you more than I should have been able to! Excuse me for singing my own praises, but I think I did a pretty good job!"

That was the main reason for Jenié's ongoing inner conflict: She could no longer nurture Kunon's talent on her own. He was brilliant, and he could progress even beyond what Jenié taught him. But the end was in sight.

She wanted to entrust him to a better sorcerer than herself. It was for Kunon's sake, too. Jenié's presence was becoming a hindrance to his growth, and her meager pride wouldn't allow it to continue.

It was time to let Kunon go—to let him spread his wings in an even greater, wider world. Truthfully, it was long past time.

If Kunon had just let her go...

For the past half year, she had been dragging her feet, putting off the inevitable.

“Strictly speaking, I haven’t had anything to teach you for more than a year. I used every trick I knew to keep the lessons going, but I’ve reached my limit. Don’t you agree, Master Kunon?”

“Keep tricking me!”

“Huh?”

“Don’t give up! Trick me even more magnificently! I’m saying you’re the teacher I want, Miss Jenié! So, please, keep up your tricks! Pull out all the stops!”

“.....”

Jenié backed away from her student—she had the strange feeling that she was being pursued by a younger man.

“...Like I said, I’m at my limit.”

All around her were various animals composed of water—at least fifty of them. Some so big they towered over people, others as small as a fingernail. Masses of liquid made to resemble living creatures.

Each and every one—their transparent forms reflecting the sun—was as beautiful as a work of art.

These were the A-ori Kunon had worked so hard to perfect. A-ori like these could no longer be considered elementary-level water magic. Jenié couldn’t even make one so elaborate.

Kunon’s creations were so refined...they could be presented to His Majesty the King as the invention months and years in the making from a genius sorcerer.

They were the result of all the times Jenié had fudged her way through

lessons by telling Kunon to “change the shape of the A-ori” or “change its texture.”

At first, she'd tell Kunon, “Failure is an essential part of magic. Keep trying!” But soon she'd started telling him instead, “It's okay if you don't work so hard, you know?”

Kunon seemed to take a liking to the first iteration, and sometimes when he messed up, he would say it to himself as a form of encouragement. Jenié wished he had latched on to the later version.

“... Really, I can't do this anymore.”

She truly had no memory of teaching him such amazing magic. If someone asked her to teach them the same thing right now, she wouldn't be able to.

Kunon had long since left Jenié's tutelage. He was already far, far ahead of her.

“No! I want Miss Jenié's underhanded tricks!”

“Stop calling them underhanded if you like them so much! I mean it!”

It was with those words that Jenié finally left the Gurion estate.

“...I can't lose to my student.”

Jenié passed through the gates of the Gurion house and strode off at a brisk pace.

While still at school, she had lost her passion for magic when faced with actual genius sorcerers.

She simply wasn't on their level. It was impressive enough just to come into one's magic power, so why not leave the true heights of its study to the prodigies.

But watching the growth of her first student, Kunon, had stirred up that old, discarded passion...

Kunon was obviously a genius. He quickly took in all sorts of knowledge, including even Jenié's sorry and transparent attempts at trickery, and used it to fuel his growth.

But at the same time, Jenié had witnessed him struggling, trying with all his might.

Failure is an essential part of magic.

He repeated that phrase over and over as he toiled in defiance. And one by one, he overcame every obstacle.

The gifted students Jenié had seen at magic school must have been trying just as hard.

They weren't immediately able to do whatever they were taught—they must have tried and failed countless times.

Belatedly realizing this, Jenié had begun to question herself. Back then, had she really given it her all?

It was too soon for her to throw in the towel.

So she was good at underhanded tricks, huh? Well, that was fine by her.



Kunon had taught her that, with enough dedication, even a cheap trick could become something unimaginable.

“Failure is an essential part of magic, huh? ...I wonder if I still have time.”

Sorcerer Jenié Kors—whose name would go down in history one day—had decided to spend the rest of her life exploring the depths of magic.



Chapter 4

What Comes Next

“She really left.”

“Seems so,” Kunon agreed.

Kunon’s private magic tutor, Jenié, who he’d suspected would quit soon, had finally done it.

It was a very sad moment for Kunon, but since there were countless signs, he had been prepared for this day to come.

“It may have been inevitable,” said Iko.

Even Kunon’s outspoken maid had held back from commenting on such an important matter. She had simply watched in silence as Jenié threw away her pride and revealed the truth to her student, who then tried to keep his tutor from leaving.

In the end, Jenié had gone, leaving Kunon, Iko, and the bevy of water-magicked animals standing in the garden.

“I heard that Miss Jenié was considered a good fit for you, young master, because you were just coming into your powers. Her grades at magic school

were average.”

“Apparently, yes.”

In other words, her abilities as a sorcerer were mediocre.

She could teach beginners, but it must have been difficult to instruct someone at a higher level. As Kunon’s magic grew, it became increasingly evident that she was struggling.

“But I still liked Miss Jenié, despite all that.”

“Did you really mean it when you said you liked her underhanded tricks?”

“I meant it. I really do feel that way.”

Kunon looked around at the water animals with his unseeing gaze.

“I mean, the fact that she was able to use tricks like that to scrape together ideas and extend her classes for more than a year is really impressive. I can learn the usual magic from books or any other teacher. But Miss Jenié’s reckless methods were unique. I think it suited me—I really do. She has a genuine talent for inventiveness.”

For over a year, Kunon got to experience magic through Jenié’s desperate tricks. He’d probably done a lot that was totally unnecessary, but those experiences had honed his skill and ingenuity.

There was no way Kunon’s dream would be realized through normal methods, and so he felt that these past two years spent repeating odd, unconventional exercises were extremely valuable. None of it had been a waste of time, as far as he was concerned.

“But I guess ‘underhanded tricks’ isn’t really a compliment, huh,” Kunon admitted. “I was so anxious to stop her from leaving that I kept saying it over and over. I truly think it’s her most amazing talent, though.”

“Well, I agree it doesn’t sound very nice,” said Iko. “In the future, try to be more polite.”

Judging from her parting words, Jenié had been utterly furious, even though Kunon hadn’t meant to offend her.

“At any rate, I’ll miss her, you know... I lost someone dear to me.”

“Saying it like that makes it sound like she died.”

A trusted friend had left him. He couldn’t help but miss her.

“Speaking of, Iko, isn’t Lady Flora quitting, too?”

“She already quit, actually.”

“Huh? Without even saying good-bye?”

“I’m sure you’ll hear this from your father soon, but I may as well tell you first. Lady Flora gave her resignation to the marquess because she was worried she would cry if she said farewell to you in person.”

Baroness Flora Garden, Kunon’s other tutor, had taught him everything he would have learned at the school for noble children. But Kunon had recently taken the school advancement exams and graduated, so he no longer needed her lessons.

She was a talented woman who could also handle material taught at the senior school, but as Kunon was not going to inherit the Gurion estate, he had no need for such instruction.

“I see...,” said Kunon. “Maybe I’ll send her a letter to thank her for everything.”

“I think she would be delighted. While you’re at it, could you ask her if there are any tall, well-paid, handsome male servants between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five in Baron Garden’s household?”

“For you to marry?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to abandon me to marry one of the baron’s servants?”

“It will be hard to part with you, young master, but I wish to marry. Besides, you can get by on your own now, can’t you?”

“I can’t! Miss Jenié and Lady Flora have both quit. If you leave me, too, I won’t be able to endure it. Did you know? There’s an old wives’ tale that rabbits die when they’re lonely.”

“Well, that’s all right if it’s just an old wives’ tale.”

“True. If I were a rabbit, I’d be fine. But I’m not a rabbit, so the loneliness is sure to kill me.”

“Ah-ha-ha, hilarious! I think it’s about time we have tea.”

“Okay.”

“Make sure to mention my future husband in your letter, all right?”

“Not a chance.”



Perhaps, like Jenié, this was a good opportunity for Kunon to make a change.

He felt like his life had come to a turning point with the receipt of his graduation certificate, and now that his private tutors were all gone, his daily routine began to shift.

Lessons and magic classes had taken up almost all his mornings, but now that time was completely free. Kunon liked spending his free time immersed in his books and research materials, so that suited him just fine, but...

Jenié’s words continued to weigh on his mind—she’d encouraged him to take a more brilliant sorcerer as his teacher.

Time was finite.

Kunon could read books and do research as much as he wanted by himself. But he wouldn’t always be able to train with a teacher.

Kunon still considered Jenié to be his first choice, but it wasn’t as though he had no interest in other sorcerers. They held the thrill of the unknown: whole swaths of knowledge he had never encountered, and brand-new experiences—something nine-year-old Kunon was still overwhelmingly lacking.

By getting along well with his teachers, Kunon had learned all kinds of things that had nothing to do with his schoolwork, and he considered those lessons valuable as well.

He was sure he wouldn’t achieve his ambitions by simply fumbling along

alone. His knowledge, experience, and magic all had a long way to go.

If Kunon wanted to reach his goal, a new magic instructor might be necessary.

“Do you think I need a new magic teacher, Iko?”

The hand he was using to read paused as Kunon posed the question to his maid. Iko was standing by in the same room.

“Royal Sorcerer Zeonly Finroll is famous for being *extremely* handsome!” Iko replied excitedly. “Let’s have your father invite Master Zeonly to be your new magic tutor right away! Come on! Right now, hurry!”

“Master Zeonly, huh...? I’d prefer a female teacher, though.”

“Don’t be greedy. He’s a Royal Sorcerer, you know.”

“There are probably female Royal Sorcerers, too.”

“I’m going to tell Princess Mirika that you chose a female sorcerer for terrible ulterior motives.”

“Please don’t. But there must be elderly women who are sorcerers, too, right?”

“They’re still women, no matter how old they are! I don’t remember raising you to be an ageist pig! That’s not gentlemanly!”

“Th-that’s true... I apologize. You’re right, an old woman is still a woman. I’m quite clueless about such affairs.”

What “affair” could possibly involve a nine-year-old boy and an elderly woman was a total mystery, but Kunon seemed already convinced of what he was saying.

“Anyway, let’s ask Father about finding a new magic teacher,” he said.

As they say, when one door closes, another one opens.

Upon Kunon’s graduation, his private tutors had left the Gurion estate. But that had given him a chance to meet new people.

“A new magic teacher?”

That night, Kunon consulted with his father about his ideas.

Kunon had begun dining in the main house every once in a while, and he seized the opportunity to talk to Arsan, who had returned from his work at the palace.

It wasn't a private matter, so it was a perfectly acceptable topic for the dinner table.

"Did Miss Jenié quit, then?" his father asked. "I do remember her saying something about that."

"Yes, she resigned today, though I'd hoped she would stay a little longer."

She had put off quitting for about half a year because Kunon kept stopping her, but in the end, she had reluctantly admitted the truth about her situation and taken her leave.

He wasn't able to keep her any longer, and he felt sure she would refuse if they tried to bring her back.

"I see. I'm sure she has her reasons. It seems there's nothing we can do."

In fact, Arsan had heard Jenié's reasons straight from the woman herself. She'd said that, at her current skill level, she could no longer help Kunon improve. Iko had further told him that it would be a kindness to let Jenié go, as she was struggling considerably to come up with lessons.

With these things in mind, Arsan was able to readily accept Kunon's request. It seemed the time was right for a new magic teacher.

"So I was thinking I'd like Master Zeonly Finroll, the Royal Sorcerer, as my next tutor."

"Wait, Kunon."

This, however, Arsan could not accept so readily.

"Oh, Master Zeonly. He's rumored to be quite handsome, isn't he?"

Tinalisa's interest was piqued.

"I've heard his name, too," Ixio chimed in.

"Hold on a minute. Asking a Royal Sorcerer to teach you is out of the question."

The marquess was a civil official with regular dealings at the palace, and this idea was giving him pause.

“Oh, it’s not possible? Even though you’re unfathomably close with His Majesty the King?”

“It can’t be done—and tell Iko to come to my room later.”

The maid needed to be reprimanded for putting such nonsense into his son’s head. But she wasn’t present, so that would have to wait.

“Listen, all right? Royal Sorcerers, as their title implies, work in the palace. They’re as strictly regulated as the military, and they take orders only from His Majesty and those in their direct chain of command... To put it simply, they don’t have a lot of freedom. They are only rarely allowed to leave the castle, and their contact with outsiders is severely limited. It would be difficult just to meet one of them, let alone invite them to our home. Even I couldn’t secure a meeting with a Royal Sorcerer. They’re researchers operating outside political authority and social status.”

Royal Sorcerers were the most outstanding magic users in the kingdom, and their rare powers were employed in service of the country. Because many of their projects were confidential, they weren’t allowed contact with the outside world. What was known of them were mostly rumors—such as Zeonly’s good looks, which Tinalisa had mentioned a moment ago.

“Is that so? Then how about something like this?” said Kunon.

“Hmm?”

“I accompany you on a visit to the castle and then somehow lose my way, only to be saved by a passing Royal Sorcerer who somehow takes me on as their pupil. What do you think?”

Kunon looked very satisfied with his plan. The idea itself was full of holes, however. Just why was he so proud of it?

“I think it’s a little too vague.”

“Vague? Personally, I’d call it a meticulous strategy with a ninety percent success rate.”

How on earth were his and his son's perceptions so different? The success rate couldn't be even 10 percent, and calling such a reckless plan meticulous was downright absurd.

"Meticulous strategies don't use the word *somehow*. And I believe you used it *twice*."

"Really? ...But I thought it was perfect... What do you think, Mother?"

"I think you're always perfect, Kunon."

Tinalisa was sweet on her youngest son—sweet enough to give him extra pocket money in secret.

"Darling, is there anything that can be done?" she asked. "Kunon seems very set on it."

"...Fine. I'll try asking. But don't get your hopes up."

And Arsan, for his part, was sweet on his wife.

After dinner, Kunon was called to his brother's room.

"Ow-ow-ow... Ahhh... Right there."

The longstanding unease between Kunon and his brother had melted away at school. Now they spent much more time together as if to make up for the years they had missed.

Ixio was lying facedown on his bed, unclothed, and Kunon was affixing water he had altered to be cold and adhesive to parts of Ixio's arms, legs, and back—anywhere that was generating excessive heat. In other words, places that were bruised and sore.

Kunon would apply medicine to the bruises and seal it in with water, creating a kind of wet compress to reduce inflammation.

"Did Master Ouro come today?"

"No, lately I've been commuting to his training hall and practicing with his other students."

Master Ouro Tauro taught Kunon as well, providing the boy free lessons in his spare time. But his main job was teaching Ixio swordplay, and he only helped

Kunon on the side. Master Ouro had said himself that since he was simply teaching Kunon swinging and basic forms, he didn't need to be paid.

Even so, and unbeknownst to Kunon, Master Ouro attended to his training quite keenly. Kunon simply had no basis for comparison.

"That sounds fun."

"It is. Though, once I advance to the senior school, I'll have a lot less time to practice."

Ixio had just graduated from the school for noble children and would enter the senior school next spring.

He'd been told he could do as he pleased until then, and after rushing through preparations for the senior school's entrance exam, he'd become engrossed in his training.

"Have you decided if you're going to magic school?" Ixio asked.

"Not yet," said Kunon. "The school is in another country, and it's far away. Besides, you have to be twelve to get in."

Kunon was nine years old. Even if he wanted to go, he didn't meet the age requirement yet. But he thought it would be nice if he could do something about his eyes by then.

He'd like to gain his vision by the age of twelve. If that wasn't achievable, perhaps he would need to shift his focus.

Currently, he was putting all his effort into acquiring his sight. But what if he couldn't manage that by the time he enrolled in magic school? In that case, he might have to make magical accomplishment his primary focus and let his other goal become secondary.

Someday, Kunon would have to leave the Gurion estate.

Once he married Mirika, he would receive lands and a title, however insignificant. But he wasn't sure what that life would be like. He needed to figure out a way to earn money, just in case. He didn't want Mirika to go without anything in her daily life.

Ambition, reality, future prospects.

Up until now, Kunon had focused only on himself and his goal of creating eyes. But recently, he'd begun to think of those around him and of the future. He was still only nine, and yet he felt adulthood creeping toward him.

"Anyway, it sounds like the entrance exam for magic school is difficult," said Kunon. "I bet I'd fail even if I took it."

"No, you'll be fine," his brother replied. "Definitely. I guarantee it."

"Really? I still only know two spells, you know."

"Really. You could pass it right now. I'm sure of it."

"Ah-ha-ha. You're just saying that because I'm your brother."

"No, I'm not. I'm being serious. I have complete confidence in you."

Ixio wasn't a sorcerer himself, so whether his confidence counted for anything was up for debate. And yet he seemed so assured; his face seemed to say, "You don't even need to ask; it's obvious."

Ixio might not be a sorcerer, but he had done some research. Specifically, he had looked into what his little brother's water crest was capable of. That was why he knew that Kunon's magic was utterly unlike anything that had been done before. It was also why he could say with confidence that Kunon would be all right. Not even professional water sorcerers could use water magic for healing.

Not long ago, Ixio had received a rather deep cut on his arm. Now he didn't even have a scar. Kunon had affixed some adhesive water to the wound to treat it, and it had healed in no time.

Why did Kunon think he would fail the entrance exam when he was capable of that kind of adaptability?

He hadn't said it over dinner, but Ixio believed Kunon himself would likely become a Royal Sorcerer in the future.

Besides, he had heard there were a lot of eccentric magic users, so even Kunon's personality wouldn't be a problem.

Ixio felt certain his brother would fit right in and do fine.



The Kingdom of Hughlia was an ancient country that had existed long before the Great War of the Seventeen Kings.

The soil was good, agriculture was thriving, and the kingdom leaned conservative. Relations with neighboring countries were positive, and there hadn't been cause for conflict for quite some time.

Because the country was old, it had a rich history full of various happenings. But recent years had proved relatively unremarkable.

At the moment, Mirika was in her private room in the royal castle—relatively simple for a princess—reading a letter, when she suddenly kicked back her chair, stood up, and let out a cry.

“Oh goodness! It's an emergency, Laura!”

Mirika's maid, Laura, knew things must be dire. When she'd delivered the letter from Mirika's fiancé, the princess had snatched it up, opening it and examining its contents straightaway. And as she read, Mirika's expression had flipped through several emotions.

Surprise. Delight. Then back to surprise.

“Kunon is coming to the castle!” she exclaimed.

That was a serious matter, indeed, thought Laura.

More than two years had passed since Ninth Princess Mirika was betrothed to Kunon Gurion, the second son of a marquess.

They were obligated to meet with each other once every two weeks, and Mirika would always travel to Kunon's residence for those visits, out of consideration for the other party's circumstances.

But it seemed that this time her fiancé was coming to the castle.

Mirika had appeared gloomy when she was first engaged to Kunon, but now she looked forward to spending time with him.

She would say things like, “Why do I only get to see him once every two weeks? I know once every two or three days is too much, but can't I at least go

once a week?" At some point, this had practically become her catchphrase.

Kunon Gurion—the boy with the Hero's Scar, who had been born and raised without his sight. Mirika's every joy and sadness seemed to come back to him.

Naturally, Laura was interested in the boy who had so completely charmed her mistress.

If she had been born blind, Laura would most likely have lived in despair. But according to Mirika, Kunon Gurion seemed to be quite the cheerful young lad. The princess was always telling stories about him, and he sounded so sunny and delightful she could hardly believe her ears. All this only made her more curious.

"Is Master Kunon coming to see you, Your Highness?"

"Huh?! Ah, umm... Uh, right..."

As she checked over the letter, Mirika's expression gradually clouded over. Evidently, she was not the reason for his visit.

"He's coming to meet a Royal Sorcerer. He'll take a simple test, and if he passes, it seems they'll introduce him to a magic teacher."

"Oh? That's amazing."

Kunon Gurion had come into his powers as a sorcerer, but he was still essentially a novice with no accomplishments. Meeting someone on the opposite end of the spectrum, such as a Royal Sorcerer, should be quite difficult for a novice, even if he had connections with high-ranking aristocrats.

But Laura had an idea of why Kunon might be an exception.

Based on what she could glean from Mirika's various stray remarks, Kunon's magic was beyond belief. How in the world did one create an animal out of water? By Mirika's telling, even their texture was perfectly re-created. But how could water be made to feel like fur?

Perhaps a Royal Sorcerer had similar questions and, taking an interest, had summoned Kunon to the castle.

"...Kunon will visit me, won't he?" asked Mirika.

He was coming to the palace but not to see Mirika. It seemed she was worried she wouldn't get the chance to meet him while he was at the palace.

"Why don't you write him a reply? You could suggest having tea after his test. What do you think?"

"But what if he says no...?"

"From what you've said about him, Your Highness, I doubt Master Kunon will refuse."

If Kunon Gurion was at all like Mirika had described, he was the type to respond with something like, "Alas, I'd hoped to be the one to ask *you* to tea, my princess. Will you allow me to refuse just for a moment, so that I can invite you instead?"

"B-but... If he *does* refuse..."

A girl in love could be overcome by even the smallest of matters. Laura saw her younger self in Mirika, and it was both heartwarming and a little embarrassing.

I sure have gotten old, she thought. But that was beside the point.

"Princess Mirika, just to be certain—"

Mirika had apparently decided on writing a letter and had taken some stationery out of a drawer. Her pen was hovering over the page as she dwelled on what to say first, but when she heard Laura's voice, she looked up.

"What? If Kunon says no, I'll bawl my eyes out, and I won't allow you to complain."

Laura was afraid her mistress might do just that. When Mirika cried, it was a real pain and went on for ages... But that was also beside the point.

"I think we should prepare a strategy or take measures against Her Highness the Third Princess, His Highness the Fourth Prince, and all the other princes and princesses," Laura suggested.

"You're right."

The young girl's expression changed from that of a lovesick child to that of a

wee politician. She may be the ninth princess with little hope of succeeding the throne, but her stern, intimidating face was clearly that of a royal. She would have her way.

“I wonder if they know yet about Kunon’s visit.”

“I believe they do. If the Royal Sorcerers have already been contacted, I’m sure the information has been leaked by now.”

In other words, they were already one step behind.

Mirika was in an unfavorable position when it came to the information war within the royal family. She had no chance of winning. Her elder brothers and sisters, and sometimes even the royal consorts, held more sway than she did. No one paid the slightest attention to someone with a rank as low as hers.

But it would be an act of self-destruction to give up on the fight. Doing the best she could was part of Mirika’s duty as a princess of Hughlia.

“...Then do you think the date of his visit has also gotten out?”

“Well, now... I’m not sure about that. It wouldn’t be surprising if it had, but Master Kunon hasn’t made a name for himself yet, so his true abilities aren’t well-known. Your siblings may not be paying much attention to him.”

“Mm...”

Still wearing a serious expression, Mirika pushed her pen across the paper, filling the stationery.

“I’m going to see Sister Raysha. Please inform her. And please mail this for me.”

“Understood.”

A day after she sent the letter, a reply came for Mirika.

“Hooray, Laura! Kunon says he will meet with me after his test!”

The princess was so happy she was practically skipping—and all because of a single letter.

“That’s wonderful. What exactly did he write?”

“Let me see... He said, ‘Instead of tea, why don’t we have dinner at a

restaurant somewhere so we can spend more time together? I hope you'll allow me to see your face, so fair it shines even in the dark of night. Though I guess I can't really see it.'"

"My, my."

Well done, young Kunon, Laura thought. So you came up with an even more elaborate invitation, eh?

"This is the first time Kunon has invited me to dinner! It's okay for me to go, right?!"

"If a guard and I accompany you, it should be fine."

They were still children, but they were also a princess and her noble fiancé. They wouldn't be left on their own, and as long as they didn't stay out late, there shouldn't be an issue.

"Prepare the oil massage! I need to look beautiful!"

"You aren't old enough to need an oil massage."

A child of eleven could hardly require such things. Her skin was smooth and fine. The youthful radiance in her hair shone like a halo, and her clear, love-filled eyes practically twinkled.

I really have gotten old, thought Laura.



Chapter 5

On to the Royal Castle

“I didn’t think I would have the chance to wear this outfit again,” Kunon said as his carriage passed through the gates of the Gurion estate.

“We can never be sure what life has in store for us,” said his father.

Kunon was once again wearing the formal outfit his mother, Tinalisa, had specially made for him when it was decided he would attend school, complete with its matching cute bow tie.

He had successfully graduated and didn’t have any parties or the like to attend. And above all, he was only nine and quickly growing. That was why he hadn’t expected to wear the outfit again.

But now he was on his way to the royal palace, and formal wear was a must. Perhaps his mother had predicted such a turn of events right from the beginning.

His father, Arsan, was sitting across from him, also in formal attire. In Arsan’s case, however, it was simply his everyday work outfit.

“It’s true, you know,” he said. “I never thought the day would come when you would accompany me to the castle.”

Perhaps once, Arsan had thought. But even then, he hadn't imagined it would come so soon.

He'd harbored vague expectations of taking Kunon to meet His Majesty just before his son's marriage to Mirika or of bringing him to sign papers dissolving their engagement... After all, Kunon's only connection to the palace was his fiancée.

But Kunon had defied his father's expectations.

The other day, Arsan had approached His Majesty and casually broached the subject of Kunon's desire to study under a Royal Sorcerer. He was preparing to be rejected...when he unexpectedly received permission for a meeting.

He had asked why and was told that the Royal Sorcerers had shown interest in Kunon's magic. It had nothing to do with connections or favors.

"How marvelous," he said.

Arsan was a civil official in a department completely unrelated to magic, so he didn't understand much about it. However, he could tell that *this* wasn't ordinary.

He was *touching* it—this marvel called magic.

"Why don't you get a real one, Father? With your resources and influence, it wouldn't be any trouble."

"I can't. I wouldn't be able to work at home anymore."

Despite what he was saying, however, Arsan continued intently petting the water cat curled up in his lap. Or maybe this display was merely proving his point. If he was this taken with the cat, how would he get any work done with a real one around?

This cat was a mass of water Kunon had made with magic—the result of countless hours spent refining his skills in altering form, texture, and temperature. You might say it was the culmination of what he had learned from Jenié's underhanded tricks—*ahem*, technical skills. Over the past few months, Kunon had only become more capable of mimicking the real thing.

In fact, of all the animals Kunon could produce, cats were what he was best

at. That was because he had touched a real cat with his own hands. Some time ago, a black cat had wandered onto the estate grounds, and it still occasionally paid a visit.

“I bet if we made full use of the resources and power of the Gurion family, we could gather up all the cute kittens in the world,” said Kunon.

“Don’t talk nonsense... Tina is a dog lover. As if she would allow cats.”

That aside, such animals liked to hang around their owners’ feet and posed a tripping hazard for Kunon. For that reason, the question of allowing animals in the Gurion household had long since been settled. No one ever even talked about wanting a pet.

“Really? Both Princess Mirika and Iko said keeping cats was like a pastime for nobles.”

“A pastime?”

“They said it was a sort of status symbol for the nobility to keep cats outside their manors. I thought it would be fine to have them inside, but I was told it’s rude to bring them into the home.”

“.....”

I’m almost certain that’s a metaphor for mistresses, not a rule about actual cats, thought Arsan. But he decided to keep that thought to himself, since Kunon was still only nine and too young for such talk.

Iko was one thing, but if Mirika had said it, too, she must have meant it literally. If it had only been Iko, Arsan would have given her a stern talking-to and a pay cut. What Arsan didn’t know was that the things Iko said were picked up by Kunon, whose words and actions had a considerable impact on Mirika.

“... Keeping cats outdoors, huh?”

It was an oddly appealing idea.

As a child, Arsan had done nothing but study, and as an adult, he worked all the time. He’d lived a serious life without any real hobbies. And when he thought about Kunon’s future, he became so anxious he threw himself even further into his work as a means of escape.

But Kunon was growing up, and now his desire to meet a Royal Sorcerer was being fulfilled. At this point, Arsan's worries and fears had all but vanished.

Maybe it'd be all right to keep a cat outside. It wasn't as if he was taking a mistress. And he had more than enough resources and power to provide for a cat.

It had been a long time since he'd petted a cat, and...it soothed him. Even if it was only for a little while, he wanted to sit and do nothing but stroke its fur.

I must be thoroughly exhausted, he thought.

If he could spend the time with a cat, he might even like to take a vacation.

The flame of an aspiration had been lit in his heart.

Oblivious, Kunon rambled on while Arsan sat, half listening, still petting the water cat in his lap.

Soon, the carriage passed through the gates of the royal castle.

"Father, we've arrived."

"Wait. I only need a moment longer."

"I'll conjure it again on our way home."

"But it won't be *this* cat, will it? It'll be a different cat."

"Father, that isn't even a real creature..."

"That only makes me more reluctant to part with it. The moment you dispel your magic, this cat will cease to exist in our world. I can feel its fur and its warmth. So precious...and yet so fleeting..."

"...I don't mind staying, but... It looks like someone from the castle is waiting for us."

"...Then we must hurry."

Kunon's words flipped a switch in Arsan. He quickly opened the carriage door himself, ignoring the confusion of the driver, who had been waiting for a signal to do it for him.

"Hello, Lord Gurion."

“I say, Lady Raysha!”

Though it had been only a moment, he’d kept someone rather important waiting. Arsan disembarked from the carriage in a panic and quickly bowed.

The woman in front of him was clad in a hooded black jacket bearing the seal of the Royal Sorcerers. It was Second Princess Raysha.

“Oh, you brought a cat with you? How cute—and such lovely black fur.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just one of my son’s magic tricks.”

“Huh?”

Raysha, unable to understand what she’d heard for a moment, watched as Arsan set the cat down on the ground in front of her and with a *splash!* the cat burst and disappeared.

“...That was...magic...?”

Raysha had heard rumors that Kunon could do all sorts of interesting things, but...that cat had looked just like the real thing. She would never have believed it if someone had told her it was made of water. Its appearance was so perfect, it would have been impossible to tell from a glance that it wasn’t real.

“Greetings.”

As Raysha stared, dumbfounded, at the wet spot left on the ground, a boy stepped out of the carriage after his father. At less than ten years old, he had a slight build, with a patch of leather over his eyes and a cane in his hand.

“I’m Kunon Gurion. Thank you for making time for me today.”

He bowed politely, the picture of a miniature gentleman.

“My name is Raysha,” she replied. “I’m a new member of the Royal Sorcerers.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Raysha.”

After exchanging brief introductions, Raysha shifted her gaze to Arsan.

“Lord Gurion, Kunon has been entrusted to my care. I’ll be taking him to the Black Tower from here. Is that all right with you?”

“Yes. Please look after him.”

Arsan would be heading to a room somewhere in the castle, while Kunon was bound for the Black Tower, where the Royal Sorcerers did their work—a place isolated from the castle proper.

“Well then, Kunon, if you end up staying late, we can head home together... Oh, that’s right, you’re having dinner with Princess Mirika tonight, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I made a reservation at the restaurant where you won over Mother, hoping it would bring me good luck—”

“Yes, that’s enough! Have fun!”

Reminiscing about his and Tina’s younger days in a place like this was extremely embarrassing for Arsan.

He told Raysha, “He’s in your hands now, please excuse me,” bowed once more, and took off at a brisk pace for the castle.

“Kunon, we should go as well,” said Raysha.

“Yes. I’ll see you later.”

After bidding farewell to his family’s coach driver, Kunon fell into step alongside the second princess.

“Kunon, are you all right to walk?”

Raysha had thought Kunon might need help, but he easily kept pace with her.

“Completely. I have trouble with gravel and uneven terrain, but if the ground is flat, I’m fine. Even more so indoors.”

Though their route differed from Arsan’s, Kunon and Raysha were also making a quick journey through the castle. The Black Tower was a separate structure, but it would have required a lengthy detour to reach it from their previous location, and cutting through the castle would save time.

“I see. Then would you mind hearing me out while we walk?” she asked.

“Are you already prepared to teach me about the essence of sorcery?”

“Ah... I’m still a rookie, so I can’t teach you something like that.”

“Then perhaps a new interpretation of compound magic? Oh, or a practical method for applying the old interpretation to a new one?! A new theory on three-dimensional and oblique magic circles?! Amazing! You’re simply amazing, Lady Raysha!”

The words he was spouting were so advanced it was hard to believe he was just a child.

Raysha now had a good idea of why this boy who had yet to attend magic school was seeking a Royal Sorcerer as his teacher. She could also sense how excited and passionate Kunon was about being there. All that remained was to find out if he had the skills to impress the big shots.

But first things first.

“I’m sorry. What I have to say has nothing to do with magic.”

“...Oh. I see.”

His disappointment was obvious, and Raysha could sympathize. She, too, would rather discuss magic all day than the boring subject at hand. All she wanted was to study magic without being bothered. She wanted to know all about Kunon’s wildly unique abilities. She was dying to ask about them.

But whether she wanted to, there was something Raysha had to say first.

“Mirika asked me to look after you.”

“Her Highness Mirika?”

This caught his interest. It was nice to see that the two of them got along well.

“You probably aren’t interested in this at all, but try to pay attention, okay? Every generation, there’s a struggle for succession among this kingdom’s heirs, and we’re in the midst of one right now.”

At present, His Majesty the King had seventeen children. He had more daughters than sons—ten princesses as opposed to seven princes. Among them, three had shown magical talent: the second and third princesses, and the fourth prince.

Raysha, the second princess, had decided to live as a sorcerer and renounced her right to the throne. She was now working as a member of the Royal

Sorcerers, and though she remained a member of the royal family, she had no part in succession disputes.

The third princess and the fourth prince were the problem.

“As you probably know, the first prince is set to inherit the crown. But he can’t let down his guard because succession to the Hughlian throne is decided largely on merit and depends on one’s record of accomplishments and contributions to the kingdom. The designated heir is often replaced.

“To put it plainly, those aiming for the crown will want to have an excellent sorcerer on their side, to add to their list of accomplishments. Mirika is worried about you being dragged into the dispute— Hey, what was that?! What just happened?!”

As Raysha made her way through the dull and bothersome explanation, she happened to glance at Kunon, who had been listening in silence. That was when she saw him...gliding.

What was going on?

He hadn’t been walking—she was sure of it. Instead, he’d been moving forward smoothly without taking a single step.

“Hmm?” said Kunon.

“Don’t act like you don’t know! I saw it— Ah! That—that’s it!”

He *was* gliding. It looked like he was sliding around on a layer of ice.

“Oh, this? I’m just riding on A-ori that I’ve turned into little sleds made of ice. They’re spread very thinly over the soles of my shoes.”

Even after hearing the theory behind the magic, Raysha didn’t quite understand it.

“The trick is to stay a little light on your feet,” he explained. “If you put your whole body weight onto them, it creates friction, and you don’t slide as well.”

There was no way she could understand the “trick” when she didn’t even comprehend the basic mechanic.



“Would you like to glide, too, Lady Raysha? It’s fun, and it isn’t difficult. I’d love to have a beauty such as yourself join me.”

“I’ll do it! No—wait! Our conversation comes first!”

Raysha was a sorcerer, too. She couldn’t help but be intrigued by new and unfamiliar magic. She was fascinated. She didn’t care a whit about her family’s tedious battle for the throne.

Between the water cat from earlier and the gliding just now, Kunon had already captivated Raysha’s curiosity and interest.

However, that was all the more reason for her to finish.

“Let’s wrap this up! Whatever you do, don’t carelessly involve yourself in any camp or faction, okay? I’ll protect you as much as possible, but be careful of what you say and do! Don’t make any promises or sign any documents! Got it?! You understand, right?! Okay, now let me glide!”

Her excitement over the chance to experience unfamiliar magic made her explanation a little rushed and sloppy, but she had fulfilled her promise to Mirika and passed on the warning.

Ultimately, all Raysha had to do was keep Kunon away from anyone with ulterior motives. That was it. Was all that explanation really necessary?

The new magic was more important, and trying it out was now Raysha’s top priority.

By lunchtime, the ruckus caused by a Royal Sorcerer and a child zooming through the castle halls, guards and knights chasing after them, would be the hottest topic in the castle.

When Arsan heard about it, he held his head in his hands. Whatever would he do with that boy?



“I sincerely apologize.”

“We’re sorry.”

Raysha and Kunon had gotten a little too carried away with their gliding. The guards and knights had been mobilized, and it had turned into quite the kerfuffle.

Humans, it seemed, shared the same instincts as small animals. The gliding pair had impulsively fled from their pursuers, only amplifying the chaos.

Ultimately, they suffered disgraceful capture by a knight and were sternly reprimanded.

The Great Corridor Gliding Incident, which occurred shortly after Kunon first set foot in the castle, would be remembered and discussed for a long, long time.

“...Well, then. Shall we pull ourselves together and try this again?”

After being lectured by the knight who had apprehended them, Raysha and Kunon were expelled from the palace. They’d gotten a little sidetracked in their merriment, and it was about time to return to their original goal.

“Knights are so impressive. To think he caught up with us so easily at that speed. I couldn’t make us go any faster.”

“Right?! That guy was crazy fast, wasn’t he?! Unbelievable... No, wait. Forget that, Kunon. We need to get going.”

That new magic had been more interesting than expected, but Raysha suppressed her lingering excitement. She needed to get Kunon to the main base of the Royal Sorcerers, the Black Tower.

Most people who became Royal Sorcerers were enamored with magic. Raysha was sure many of them would be able to understand and share the enthusiasm she was feeling. And for that reason, they would probably be angrier over Kunon’s late arrival than the pandemonium he’d caused in the castle.

“Welcome, Kunon Gurion. I am Grand Master Londimonde. I command the entirety of the Royal Sorcerers.”

The man sounded older than Kunon’s father, perhaps a little past middle age.

“N-nice to meet you, Grand Master Londimonde. My name is Kunon Gurion.”

Kunon had made it to the Black Tower and was immediately brought to the Grand Master's office—or at least a room that seemed like an office.

Kunon was seated across from Grand Master Londimonde, with Raysha standing at his side.

His heart was pounding. From the moment he set foot in the Black Tower, he was filled with nervousness and excitement.

He was overwhelmed at the prospect of meeting the people he'd seen here. Every single one of them was cloaked in highly concentrated magical power.

With Miss Jenié as his only reference point for another sorcerer, just coming to the Black Tower was a valuable experience for Kunon. It was totally different from being around his former tutor. This was an entirely new kind of magic power.

Londimonde, in particular, was extraordinary.

Kunon had already noticed a difference in how Raysha's power felt compared to Jenié's, but it had been within the realm of his expectations.

This man, however, was something else.

He was so exceptional, so much more amazing than Kunon had thought possible, that he almost wondered if this man was the type of sorcerer spoken of in legends and fairy tales.

"Um, I apologize for selfishly taking up your time today," Kunon said.

"No need for that," the man replied. "We're the ones who wanted to meet you. We would have visited your home if it were allowed."

Kunon felt small.

Perhaps it was the man's deep voice or the intensity of his magical power, but Londimonde's commanding air seemed to pin Kunon in place.

"You have a water crest, I hear. Where is it?"

"My left shoulder."

"Hmm, I see. As expected, you're a two-star."

"Two...star?"

“You’ll learn more about this at magic school, but basically, there are five ranks of sorcerers’ crests.”

Kunon’s eyes widened under their leather covering.

This was probably common knowledge for a sorcerer—but since Kunon was still only an apprentice, it was his first time hearing about it.

“Aren’t there seven?” he asked.

Kunon knew that magical crests were divided into seven types: fire, water, earth, wind, light, dark, and foul.

His was water, and he was pleased with that.

“You’re not wrong. But we call those *schools* of magic, and as you say, we have verified seven types of crests. But each of the seven types consists of five ranks. That’s what I’m speaking of.”

In other words, strictly speaking, there were thirty-five crest variations.

“So I’m a two-star? It sounds like that’s second from the bottom, yes?”

“That’s how it looks to me. Two-stars are the most common statistically. You might say it’s the average rank for a sorcerer. Raysha is also a two-star.”

“And the ranks—is there some difference between the star levels?”

“Not particularly. Your rank has nothing to do with your ability. The only clear distinction is the total amount of magical power. Although, as we continue our research on crests and the like, we may find other points of difference.”

Kunon nodded.

If it was only a difference in how much power one had, it shouldn’t be too big an issue.

If he’d been told each rank signified an unimaginable disparity in talent that would impact his abilities as a magic user, he might have been pretty depressed. But since that wasn’t the case, it didn’t bother him.

“Grand Master Londimonde, are you a three-star?”

“Oh-ho. You can feel it?”

“The potency of magical power I feel from you is on a completely different level. It’s like something else entirely.”

“Potency, hmm? That’s an interesting way of putting it.”

“If Lady Raysha and I were a common cheese,” said Kunon, “you would be a carefully cultivated blue cheese.”

“What a pungent analogy. I don’t mind blue cheese, though.”

“So, Grand Master Blue Cheese, are you a three-star?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Call me that again and you’ll regret it.”

Laughing it off for now, Londimonde answered Kunon’s question.

“I’m a four-star.”

“Ah, a four-star...”

“...Oh? You don’t look very surprised.”

Londimonde nearly always shocked people with this revelation, but Kunon didn’t seem taken aback at all.

“Grand Master, he doesn’t know how rare four-stars are.”

Londimonde nodded at Raysha’s remark.

“Mm, I suppose that’s true. Kunon hasn’t yet learned the things taught at magic school. Four-stars are... Well, you’ll find out eventually.”

Four-stars were actually the highest rank among living sorcerers. There were only six currently known to exist in the world. Five-stars were found only in historical records.

It would be some time, however, before Kunon learned any of that.

“So I’ll have lessons about two-stars and four-stars and stuff like that at magic school?”

“Correct. Just between us, more than ninety percent of the people who write magic books are associated with the school system, and they sometimes conspire to keep specific information out of the books. Things like the star-ranking system—and Scarlet and Cerulean Sorcerers. There are some who

possess particular, special magic, too. The kind of people we would call heroes and saints today.”

“Um, what are Scarlet and Cerulean Sorcerers?”

“Those are titles given to people personally recognized by the world’s greatest witch. You should research them yourself at magic school if you want to know more. To get back on topic, the point is that books alone aren’t sufficient as teaching materials. Though, I suppose a nine-year-old like yourself isn’t yet in need of such information anyway.”

The minimum age for enrollment in magic school was twelve.

In short, Kunon was too young.

He had heard of the world’s greatest witch, but everything else Londimonde had just mentioned was new to him. He was interested, but he decided to do as the man said and drop it for now.

“All right, Kunon. Shall we?”

“Pardon?”

“The test. We’re quite curious about you. We’re eager to see your magic.”

Oh, right.

Kunon had come here looking for a new magic tutor; he’d simply been overwhelmed and distracted by Londimonde’s power.

The new facts he’d learned and the magic he’d felt so far had already satisfied Kunon, but his main purpose for coming here was only just beginning.

“Grand Master, the boy is amazing. He’s incredible.”

“Oh, Raysha, you sly dog. Did you see something already?”

“I didn’t just see it, I experienced it.”

“You’re really wounding me. You experienced it, eh? I must say, I’m quite curious.” Londimonde stood. “Well, Raysha, now’s the fun part. Go tell everyone that Kunon’s test is about to begin.”

Just when he’d made it to the Black Tower, Kunon found himself back outside it.

This time, however, he was accompanied by about twenty men and women of varying ages. Even without his sight, Kunon could discern differences in sex and age based on the magic power he felt from each person.

The older someone was, the more concentrated their magic felt. In other words, it was less dispersed. This was probably due to an increased ability to control their power, which had come with age—or to be more precise, with practice.

Royal Sorcerers must never skip their daily training, study, or research. The difference in their magic power, then, was down to skill.

To Kunon, everyone here was full of experience and wisdom—each one a pioneer in the history of magic within the Kingdom of Hughlia.

And all of them were focused intently on him. He could feel their gazes and the intensity of their interest clearly.

The fact that Kunon was a child who couldn't see likely didn't mean a thing to them. All that mattered was that they were about to see magic they hadn't seen before. That's why Kunon had their attention.

He was nervous, but he was also excited.

Surely any of these sorcerers would be able to guide Kunon as his teacher into the deepest realms of magic.

"Shall we begin?"

Grand Master Londimonde, leader of the Royal Sorcerers, signaled the start of the test. Kunon nodded to show he was ready.

"First of all, Kunon, how many spells can you use?"

"Two."

Though he feared the number was too low, Kunon answered honestly. He could show off all he wanted, but that didn't change the fact that he only knew two spells.

Contrary to his fears, no one reacted. No one scoffed or showed disappointment. They simply kept looking at Kunon.

“That is sufficient. It seems your teacher, Jenié Kors, followed your father’s instructions.”

“Yes. My father decided it was too early for me to learn offensive magic.”

“And what do you think of his decision?”

“I think it was appropriate. When I learn something, I want to try it out in various ways. In the process, I might have caused harm to people or animals. Though I may be one myself, I believe such magic is too much for a child. It’s better to wait until one has deepened their understanding of magic and magical power before studying it.”

“I see.”

Kunon didn’t know if these questions were part of the test. Neither Londimonde’s tone nor his attitude changed in response to Kunon’s answers, so it was hard to tell if he was making a good impression.

He felt a bit uneasy.

“The two spells you know are A-ori and A-rubu, correct?”

“Yes.”

A-ori produced water, and A-rubu produced suds for cleaning. These were the water spells Kunon had learned.

That said, because he could change the characteristics of A-ori to make it look and act just like A-rubu, he didn’t use the latter very often.

“Victo. Could you come demonstrate A-ori for us?”

“Yes.”

The young male sorcerer Londimonde had called forth cast A-ori as instructed. More than thirty spheres appeared, floating in the air around him.

“Kunon. Could you use your own A-ori to steal these away?”

“...!”

Kunon was astonished.

Stealing someone else’s magic—the thought had never occurred to him

before.

The A-ori spell was used to produce and control water, but there was another version of it—one that used water that already existed. This second version was all about manipulating water. There was no need to produce any. It focused only on the “control” portion of “produce and control.”

The two variations seemed similar, but they had completely different effects. However, Jenié had told him that because both versions used about the same amount of magic, there was little need for the one that only controlled existing water.

Kunon had agreed with her logic, but there was something he hadn’t realized. Using water that already existed meant water created by other sorcerers could be targeted as well.

Kunon felt the scales fall from his eyes. It seemed so obvious now, but it had never even crossed his mind.

All at once, he was raring to go.

Even if he went home right now, he would probably feel satisfied with what he had learned so far. But Kunon’s thirst for knowledge was clamoring inside him unabated.

He wanted to pass this test and forge a connection with the Royal Sorcerers by any means possible.

“That’s enough.”

Londimonde’s voice rang out, and Kunon fell to his knees.

For the first time in a long while, he had been desperate. He was casting spells with everything he had, and in the end, he was left gasping for air.

“Well done, eh, Kunon? You’re quite good, aren’t you?”

Londimonde praised him, but Kunon felt differently.

Victo had created more than thirty A-ori, and Kunon had only managed to steal away two of them.

A mere two, despite sparing no effort.

Manipulating water came naturally to Kunon, but this was his first time using water that resisted him. It had been quite a struggle. And it hadn't gone at all the way he had hoped.

Sure enough, the ability of a Royal Sorcerer was far superior to Kunon's.

"What did you think, Victo?" Londimonde asked.

"I was surprised. I didn't think I would lose a single one. I mean, when I was little, that kind of control was extremely difficult—could I have him?"

"Get real, idiot," called someone from the crowd.

"Who are you kidding? Are you stupid?"

"Didn't you just get dumped?"

"How are you gonna look after someone else? You can't even take care of yourself!"

Victo's colleagues were viciously heckling him. Indignant, he tried to defend himself.

"What does being dumped have to do with anything?"

But this only made the heckling worse.

"Ha-ha-ha! It looks like everyone wants him," said Londimonde. "Why don't we have a thorough talk about who will take on the boy."

Kunon, still kneeling with both hands on the ground, raised his head.

"Does that mean I passed the test?"

They were clearly discussing who would become his teacher. Londimonde's remarks in particular seemed decisive.

Kunon was disappointed in his performance, but it didn't matter if he was able to forge a connection with the Royal Sorcerers. He would invariably surpass Victo someday, so he decided it was fine to accept the loss for now.

"Well, since you came all the way here, let's do a bit more, eh?" said Londimonde.

Kunon got the feeling he had already passed the test, but apparently they

weren't done.

Not that he was complaining. If they stopped now, all he would have done was lose to Victo. This was a rare opportunity, and Kunon wanted to show off his strengths a little.

Growing excited again, Kunon threw himself into the next challenge.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wahoooo! This is so funnn!”

As a result of his efforts, Kunon caught a glimpse of the aging Londimonde in an embarrassing moment of total glee. Well, he couldn't actually see it, but still.

Instructed to “do whatever he felt like,” Kunon had made one giant A-ori.

This particular sphere, which Kunon called the Supersoft-Body A-ori, was wrapped in an ultrasoft, ultra-elastic membrane. Anything of moderate weight, be it human or object, would sink deeply into the sphere if they climbed onto it.

Londimonde had jumped atop it with glee, and he was swallowed up in the soft, squishy mass.

Perhaps because it felt so pleasant, the older man seemed to become a child again as he excitedly tried swimming, rolling, and leaping around in the sphere.

Kunon was a little taken aback by the display.

When Mirika had done the same, it hadn't seemed so strange, but an older man letting himself go like this was something else entirely. Kunon couldn't see it, and to his childish mind, it felt like a scene he was better off not witnessing.

In marked contrast to Kunon, however, the Royal Sorcerers looked on shamelessly, tossing jeers at their commander.

“Unfair, Grand Master!”

“Me next!”

“Let someone else have a turn, old man!”

Apparently, they were more interested in trying the A-ori than they were in the older man's embarrassing display.

This incident, which Londimonde would later describe as “the most fun I've had in twenty years,” would go down forever in the annals of the historic Black

Tower as “that time a child made a fool of the four-star Grand Master.”

While some of the Royal Sorcerers played noisily on the Supersoft-Body A-ori, Londimonde and the others who were finished horsing around stood near the sphere, studying it.

“It looks like it could be used as a cushion.”

“It does. You could probably use it to lessen the impact of a fall, depending on the height.”

“It has an interesting texture. It would be good as a bed, I think.”

“True. In fact, it looks like someone’s already sleeping in it.”

“Sometimes I use it for napping in the afternoon. You can also raise or lower the water temperature somewhat.”

Kunon had casually joined the group, but no one seemed to mind.

To what extent did the Supersoft-Body A-ori have the characteristics of water?

What would happen if you set fire to it?

In addition to these questions, the sorcerers exchanged heated comments, such as “I wonder how long the magic’s duration is,” and “It would be a little better for sleeping if it was slightly more flexible,” and “No, I think it’s exactly the right softness.”

“...Oops, that’s right. We have to continue the test.”

Londimonde suddenly came to his senses.

There were all kinds of things he wanted to try with the Supersoft-Body A-ori, but they would have to wait.

“Do you know what would happen if I made it more elastic?” said Kunon. “You could use it to bounce really high. If you jumped on it, I think you could go *boing* right up to about the second floor of the castle.”

“What?! ...No, that’s enough, Kunon. If you let this A-ori distract us any further, you won’t be able to go home today. We’ll start wanting to keep you here. I think several of us already feel that way.”

In a voice too low for Kunon's ears to pick up, Londimonde added, "Though, that's not a problem for us." The man was serious, and his words contained a real threat. If Kunon carelessly agreed, they really would keep him there.

Luckily, however, the boy didn't hear him, and he soon recalled his promise to have dinner with Mirika.

He had arrived early that morning, but thanks to all the time taken investigating the A-ori, it was already nearly noon.

Kunon had thoroughly enjoyed himself, and he wanted to try various experiments as well, but dinner with his fiancée won out by a small margin.

The Supersoft-Body A-ori was only one of the tricks he had up his sleeve. If that alone took up so much time, there was no way he could show them everything before evening arrived.

Anyway, since it seemed the test had become something of a formality, he wanted to hurry and show off a few more tricks.

"I can do other things, too. Like this."

A black cat suddenly appeared in Kunon's outstretched hands.

They'd already become sidetracked. He didn't need Londimonde's prompting to move things along, did he?

Kunon decided to speed things up and demonstrate as much as possible in quick succession. He wanted to hear as much feedback as he could from these extraordinary sorcerers.

I'm going to show you everything I've got, one after the other. It's not like I have anything to hide.

"Is this the animal reproduction I've heard about?"

"Yes."

Someone took the cat from Kunon's hands.

"Oh, its body is warm. Incredible, it feels like a real cat."

"It's only an imitation, though," said Kunon.

He could make many animals based on information from illustrations and

reference books.

However, the only animal he could accurately reproduce down to the feel of its hide was a cat, which he had once touched himself.

Going off what he knew about a cat's texture, he had extensively fine-tuned the shape and feel of the water's membrane to create this masterpiece.

It had been the most difficult A-ori modification Kunon had tried. It had taken ages.

He'd wondered more than once if it was necessary to spend so much time learning such a skill. But it was popular with everyone who saw and touched it, so he supposed it was worth it. Mirika had also enjoyed seeing the water cat grow closer and closer to the real thing each time she visited.

"It can't move, and it only has three forms: standing, sitting, and curled up. If I could observe a real cat's movements, I might be able to re-create it in more detail."

Kunon couldn't really get an idea of how cats moved from only a verbal explanation. The only thing he had been able to add from imagination alone was the cat's blink.

"Movement, huh?" said one of the other sorcerers. "You'd have to keep altering the A-ori to make it appear to be moving."

"To change something's shape and color and make it look alive. Ha-ha, now that's something you can only do with water."

"Let me see!"

"No way. I'm going to keep it and raise it."

Well, it's not alive, so you can't "raise" it, thought Kunon.

"In other words," said Londimonde, "if you know the details of something's shape and understand its movement, you can reproduce it with water."

Kunon nodded.

"I think so," he said. "Actually—"

Actually, he had already done it once.

He'd created a copy of his maid, Iko, out of water.

For the motion, he'd referenced his own movements. He couldn't make the particulars of the face, so the model was a bit flat, but he was able to create a "water doll" that looked like Iko, if only from a distance.

But according to Iko, the doll's movement was quite strange.

"Its movements were strange?"

"It seems there's some sort of difference between the way a real person walks and the way a water doll appears to walk..."

Iko hadn't been able to explain it well, so Kunon had a hard time grasping the problem.

He had other things to do, and Iko had found it unpleasant and asked him to stop, and that had been the end of it.

"My maid didn't like it, so I haven't made much progress with my research. To be honest, I'm not really prepared to show you..."

The Royal Sorcerers, however, were researchers.

"Grand Master, wouldn't it be easier to see it?" one said.

"Exactly so," replied Londimonde. "Kunon, why don't you try demonstrating it for us here?"

They wanted to get a good look at any new magic, skilled or otherwise.

"Understood."

At the time, Kunon had casually agreed.

Later, he would come to regret this. *I should never have said yes.*

Some thought should have been given to why his maid had disliked the water doll. But neither Kunon, Londimonde, or the other Royal Sorcerers gave it any consideration.

The water doll was, originally, an A-ori—nothing more than a simple spell for creating and manipulating a water sphere. Naturally, the water doll, retaining the characteristics of an A-ori, floated a bit above the ground.

This was the reason Iko had found it unsettling.

It had the shape of a human and moved like a human, but it worked by a nonhuman logic. It walked as if gliding along the ground, occasionally started to float, and if it encountered an obstacle, it either flowed through it like water or burst open.

While it looked somewhat human from a distance, its odd movements gave it the inhuman quality of a ghost or a spirit.

What happened was an accident.

Kunon, however, was sure they would have carried on until something happened, so perhaps it was inevitable.

A maid cleaning a room on the third floor of the castle just happened to glance out the window.

And at that exact moment, a figure went by outside.

It moved from above the window to below it.

For a second, the maid was unable to recognize what she'd seen and couldn't understand what had happened.

"A-aaaiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

A beat later, the maid's mind finished processing the sight, and she screamed.

Someone had jumped.

A person had fallen from the window of one of the upper floors.

And judging from the brief glimpse of color, the person was dressed in the clothes of a servant. It had to be one of her fellow maids.

Guards and knights who had heard the woman's shriek burst into the room, and the frightened maid explained what she had just witnessed.

There was chaos.

Maids from all over the castle gathered, paling at the thought of one of their colleagues jumping from such a height. As they began checking to see who was missing, gossip started to spread.

Meanwhile, one of the knights had the presence of mind to open the window and look down.

No one was there.

There was no sign of someone having jumped.

Had the maid been mistaken? No, she was genuinely terrified. There could be no doubt that she had seen something.

“.....”

There was no one outside.

What could be seen, however, was a group of Royal Sorcerers, gathered in front of the Black Tower in the distance, making a racket...

“Oh, is that it?” he said.

Flying round and round in the air above the sorcerers was a doll shaped like a human and dressed as a servant.

And so the culprit behind the uproar was revealed.

The incident was settled with the Royal Sorcerers and their Grand Master being docked one month’s pay—and with a reprimand for Kunon.

The young sorcerer was in a world of trouble.

““My most sincere apologies.””

Knights and officials rushed to the Black Tower, and after some scolding, the Royal Sorcerers and Kunon expressed their genuine regrets to the party most injured by the incident: the maid who had screamed upon seeing the doll.

The sorcerers outside had no idea what the dolls would look like from inside the castle.

Even when a large crowd of people came running out toward them, the sorcerers responded with curious expressions, asking what had happened as if they were completely uninvolved.

When they heard that Kunon’s water doll had caused considerable panic because it looked like someone had jumped out of a castle window, they apologized profusely.

Then and there, Grand Master Londimonde declared—of his own volition—that he and the other Royal Sorcerers would give up one month’s salary. It was further concluded that a part of that money would be given to the maid as a settlement.

Though they couldn’t undo the damage, it was important that everything be concluded privately. That way, when someone brought up the incident, it could be brushed off with something like, “Oh, that matter has been settled.” This was because some of those in power tended to make a big fuss over responsibility, and it would quickly become annoying.

Once things were settled, the guards and knights withdrew, leaving behind a group of very penitent sorcerers.

The knight who had caught Raysha and Kunon in the Great Corridor Gliding Incident that morning had been present again just now, and his gaze had been especially painful. Kunon, of course, couldn’t see it, but Raysha felt it keenly.

“My, my. It seems we got a bit carried away.” Londimonde sighed.

In fact, it was he who had asked Kunon, “How far can it fly? Have you tried it before? Why don’t we test it out?”

“I guess making people fly is a no-go... It was fun, though.” Raysha sighed as well.

She had been the one yelling “Faster! Faster!”

“I’ve already gotten in trouble twice just this morning...” The doll’s creator, Kunon, joined in the sighing.

It was his first time at the castle, and he’d already been reprimanded twice in a single morning. One time, and he might have gotten off with a stern warning, but twice was unheard of. That was two times too many. His father was sure to give him a talking-to later.

Kunon felt a gloominess wash over him.

“So what are we going to do about this kid?” one of the Royal Sorcerers asked Londimonde. They sounded just as dejected as Kunon felt. Judging by the voice, this was Victo.

“Right. There’s no use in getting depressed, so let’s pull ourselves together.”

The sorcerers recovered from the incident so quickly that Kunon began to doubt they felt any remorse at all. It was true, however, that they’d get nowhere by moping around.

“Wahoo!”

Some of them launched themselves onto the Supersoft-Body A-ori with shouts of glee.

“Give me the cat!”

“Don’t touch it! It’s mine!”

And some of them fought over the water cat. *Yeah, I don’t think these adults feel even a shred of guilt*, thought Kunon.

But he decided to let that go.

Failure was an essential part of magic, and by experimenting and failing, one could improve little by little. There was no point in worrying over every mistake. Though perhaps they could have worried about this one for just a little longer...

“Next, let’s trade ideas,” said Londimonde. “We can talk over lunch in the Tower.”

“Sure,” said Kunon. “By the way, what was the outcome of my test?”

“You must know already, right? I’ll take responsibility for finding you a teacher.”

That meant Kunon had passed. He’d had a feeling, but hearing it put into words, he was suddenly flooded with joy.

“...Yes! I did it!”

That winter’s day, when Kunon Gurion was only nine years old, he earned the approval of the Royal Sorcerers—not as the son of a nobleman, but as a simple sorcerer in training.

It was the first achievement he’d earned with his own two hands.

Incidentally, this was also the day that the number of stains on his official record increased by *three*.



As they ate, Kunon continued his extremely enjoyable conversations with the Royal Sorcerers.

They spoke of interesting experiments, times they had failed, and new investigations into the field of magic. Topics flew by one after the other, each easily outstripping the knowledge Kunon had scraped together through desperate study.

He focused on simply noting it all down. The time he spent here was incredibly valuable, and he carefully recorded all of it so he wouldn't miss a single word.

"A time I messed up? I have all sorts of those stories..."

When one of the sorcerers turned the question around on Kunon, he hesitated.

Just from listening to them talk, he knew all the Royal Sorcerers' stories were about considerably high-level magic. Much of what they'd shared, he had written down word for word because he didn't understand it. When Kunon thought about what he could possibly share with such people...

"Like the time I accidentally burned myself with a highly viscous A-ori? Or the time I got dizzy in a makeshift sauna? What about the time I fell down while gliding? Or the time I tried flying but couldn't? Oh, or I could tell you about the final adjustments I made to the animals and the Supersoft-Body A-ori."

...he necessarily wound up talking about his most polished, unique accomplishments.

"Hold on a minute."

"You've got a lot of pretty interesting stories..."

"Wait, what do you mean by 'flying'? On water? How?"

Kunon would have been happy if even one story piqued their interest. But the Royal Sorcerers, who had seen plenty of magic, were nevertheless curious about many of Kunon's tales.

"Do you have any goals for the future? Even vague ones."

When Londimonde asked him that question, Kunon told him about the ambition that drove him.

“My goal is to make eyes out of magic.”

Kunon had nothing to hide. He was determined to achieve what he'd set out to do no matter what. He wouldn't change his mind, even if these pioneers in the field of magic laughed at him and told him then and there that such a dream wasn't possible.

“Oh yes? I see.”

But no one laughed.

The fun came to an end with the arrival of Kunon's father, Arsan.

“Do you understand why I'm here?” he'd said.

One of the Royal Sorcerers called out, “Kunon, it's your father.”

Kunon had gotten caught up in the conversation and lost track of time. When the meaning of those words finally sunk in, the blood drained from his face so quickly he could feel it.

His father had arrived.

Playtime was over.

Raysha escorted Kunon to the entrance of the Black Tower, where Arsan was already waiting. His imposing figure gave off every sign of his anger.

And that's when he said it:

Do you understand why I'm here?

“Um, Father, how do I put this? I have dinner plans today, so I won't be able to accompany you home... Regrettable though it may be...”

Arsan took no pity on his trembling son as the boy rambled awkwardly.

“Twice. Two times this morning alone I had to hear complaints about my son's behavior. What is the meaning of this, Kunon?”

“...I'm sorry. I got carried away.”

Sure enough, he'd caused trouble twice, and now his father was angry. Just

once wouldn't have been so bad, but twice was, as expected, unpardonable. Once wasn't really acceptable, either, of course.

"Wait, Lord Gurion. Kunon isn't in the wrong. He was following the directions that the other Royal Sorcerers and I gave..."

Raysha tried to defend Kunon, but Arsan cut her off with a stern voice.

"I disagree. I may not be well versed in magic, but I don't think it's possible for the person who casts the spell to be completely without responsibility. If that were the case, a person who injures or kills people on the orders of someone else could be let off.

"Kunon, do you understand why I didn't let you learn offensive magic? It's because you're still an inexperienced child who doesn't think about the consequences of your actions. That's precisely why you got into trouble today. No matter what anyone tells you to do, if you think it could cause harm, you must refuse.

"Someone told you to do something, so you did, and it turned out badly. But saying it's not your fault because you only did it on someone else's orders? That's irresponsible, and I won't allow it.

"Magic is power. As long as you wield power, you must take responsibility for your actions. If you're to start studying magic in earnest from now on, you must act like an adult. Think carefully about the consequences of the spells you cast."

"...I understand. I'm sorry."

Kunon's apology was sincere. Arsan was right; there was no excuse for what he'd done. Even if he was following Londimonde's directions, Kunon should have thought about what could happen before using his magic.

He was the one who'd made the water doll fly near the castle. If he had stopped to think about why the Black Tower was located so far away, he would have quickly realized that it wasn't a good idea to cast magic in the castle's direction.

There was no excuse.

"...I'm sorry, too."

Raysha, who had encouraged Kunon to use his magic, apologized alongside him on behalf of the other sorcerers.

“Lady Raysha...?” said Arsan. “Never mind, it’s fine now.”

And with that, the matter came to an end.

Arsan didn’t want to drag things out any further. There was no reason to rile up the sorcerers any more than necessary, especially now that there was a strong possibility his son would be working here in the future.

Kunon had been in the Tower all morning. That was proof enough that the Royal Sorcerers had taken a liking to him. He must have passed his test as well.

“All right, Kunon, I’m going home. It’s about time you went to see Her Highness.”

“Understood... Wait, what?”

“Please don’t be discourteous to Princess Mirika.”

Arsan cast an inscrutable glance at the group of sorcerers piled up and sleeping on the Supersoft-Body A-ori near the Tower’s exit, and then he was gone.

Kunon was left behind in the Tower, unable to parse the meaning of his father’s words. He had been so absorbed in pleasant conversation that he’d lost all track of time. Unbeknownst to him, evening had already arrived.

It was a little early for his father to be done with work, but he had probably wanted to scold Kunon before his dinner date—before he went to have fun and enjoy himself.

“He’s right,” said Raysha. “It’s about time for you to go meet up with Mirika.”

“Huh? What? Is it really that late?”

The red sky of sunset was already fading into night. Not that Kunon could see it, of course.

And so, though he wished to stay longer, Kunon prepared to leave the Black Tower.

“Oh, hold on a second.”

Raysha dashed back into the room they'd just left and announced over her colleagues' merciless booing that Kunon was leaving. When she returned to the boy's side, he started on his way, only for Raysha to stop him again.

"Since you're here, and we have the opportunity," she said, "why don't we combine our magic and speed up the journey?"

"Pardon? Combine our magic?"

"You know that water-based flying magic you mentioned? You're still working on it, right?"

The idea had been to ride on a big sphere of water—like the one the sorcerers were sleeping on—and use it to fly. A-ori floated by nature, and Kunon had intended to take that characteristic and expand on it.

"Yes. I can cast it, but...while it can float, it can't move..."

"That's fine. Don't worry about it; just cast it."

As instructed, Kunon created an A-ori big enough for two people to ride.

"Alley-oop! Hey, Kunon, you get on, too."

"I don't think I should."

"Hmm?"

"I decided the first person I fly alone with will be my fiancée. Won't your fiancé misunderstand, too, Lady Raysha? He'll bring up how you once flew alone with a man. It'll start a fight."

What a weird thing to worry about, thought Raysha.

"Forget that—just get on! I don't have a fiancé!"

New magic was more important than Kunon's odd anxieties. And besides, Raysha was already up on the sphere. How could a Royal Sorcerer, so obsessed with magic, turn down such a temptation?

She pulled the reluctant Kunon up alongside her with such force it would probably look to a bystander as if she was kidnapping him.

"...I guess I have no choice."

Now that he was atop the sphere, Kunon gave up resisting.

He might not be a Royal Sorcerer, but Kunon was also obsessed with magic. He was naturally brimming with curiosity about what would happen—about what Raysha wanted to try.

Per Raysha's instructions, Kunon made the A-ori float.

"I can get it to a certain speed. It really only drifts, though..."

It floated more than flew.

"I have a wind crest. As long as it floats, I should be able to use my power to propel it. We call this synergy."

Interesting, thought Kunon.

Synergy.

If the two of them worked together, they could make the A-ori fly.

With Kunon manipulating the spell and Raysha's wind power, how fast could they go?

Kunon had heard many valuable discussions in the Black Tower, but he hadn't seen much of the Royal Sorcerers' abilities in action. He could get an idea from what they said, but that was it.

Now, at the last minute, he'd been offered a chance to glimpse a Royal Sorcerer's skills in person as part of an experiment—a very welcome opportunity, indeed.

"It never occurred to me to ride an A-ori," said Raysha. "This is incredibly fascinating."

"The interest is mutual. I think you're fascinating, too. I bet you're like a mischievous wind, an alluring woman who teases and deceives children for fun."

"Why only children? You're making me sound like some kind of witch with special interests. Whatever—let's go!"

""Thank goodness this thing is soft.""

With Kunon's handling and Raysha's propulsion, they were able to achieve

outrageous speed.

The force of the wind buffeting Kunon's body caused him to slip while operating the sphere, and he completely lost his balance. In the end, they were forced to make an emergency landing.

Actually, it was more of a *crash* landing.

"I'm sorry," said Kunon. "That was my mistake..."

"No. This was our first attempt; I should have considered the risks more carefully. As the one in charge of the experiment, this is my fault."

Kunon had wrapped them both up in a Supersoft-Body A-ori in the nick of time, cushioning their impact and allowing them to escape unscathed.

The sphere bounced and rolled violently along the ground. When it finally came to a stop, the two of them stood up.

Their legs were trembling like a newborn deer's.

It had been terrifying.

They could have died. That was how fast they had been going.

"We need to conduct more experiments."

"I agree."

They might have just narrowly avoided a fatal accident, but their discovery could revolutionize transportation and travel— "This is the third time, Lady Raysha."

"....."

It seemed that someone had witnessed their noisy crash landing and come running.

It was the same knight who had caught them during the Great Corridor Gliding Incident and glared at them after the Falling Body Incident. Now here he was once again.

It was their third time crossing paths with him—he was practically an old acquaintance.

Kunon and Raysha were both sternly reprimanded.



Ninth Princess Mirika Hughlia had prepared for battle.

She was going to have dinner with her fiancé for the first time. What else could such an event be called, if not a battle?

“Princess, please calm down.”

“.....”

Now that the sun was starting to set, Mirika was pacing around her room, more unsettled than ever. She was so tense she didn’t even hear what Laura was saying to her.

Mirika had been fidgety since that afternoon. By the time tea was over, all the preparations had been made for dinner. The princess had been very insistent that they hurry.

Her golden hair, which had been ever so carefully maintained and groomed in anticipation of the day’s event, was practically glowing. The soft shine of youth only amplified the brilliance in every strand. Oh, to be young.

She wasn’t allowed to do anything to her pale skin beyond the necessary, but a few days of long baths had left it looking fresh, smooth, and bright. Such was the nature of youth.

Her blue dress—the same shade as her eyes and just a little more mature than usual—had been hastily prepared for this occasion.

All that remained was to wait for Kunon’s arrival.

Dinner with her fiancé.

This would be their first dinner together.

Even more importantly, it would be their first time going out on a date. She wouldn’t be making her usual trip to the detached house on the Gurion estate. No—this time, they’d be going somewhere else entirely.

Mirika was determined not to let anything go wrong that day. Her resolve was

practically radiating off of her.

“.....”

Laura let out a little sigh. She found the princess's eagerness over her first date quite adorable. Maybe it was better to simply leave her be for now.

A little while later, the sound of something hard being struck rang out inside the room.

Someone was knocking.

At long last, it was happening.

Mirika, who had been pacing aimlessly about the room like a trapped beast of prey, instantly seated herself at the table. With an elegant gesture, she lifted her teacup, the contents of which had long since gone cold.

“Laura,” she called out.

“Yes.”

Even if the princess was flailing on the inside, she looked utterly calm on the surface, skillfully donning an unbothered air.

Laura did as directed, going to the door and asking the person on the other side to state their business.

“Master Kunon Gurion has arrived.”

Finally.

Unable to wait any longer, Mirika stood, passed Laura, opened the door, and exited the room. It seemed her emotions had won out over her desire to appear dignified.

“Princess, please hold on a moment.”

Laura followed her at a leisurely pace.

What kind of person was this Kunon boy? Laura was filled with curiosity over the prince charming who had won the heart of her precious princess.

As it turned out, Kunon was quite something.

“I'll be your escort today, as is proper. Your hand, please.”

The boy was wearing a covering over his eyes. Just as Laura had been told, it seemed he was blind, though there was no sign of that at all in his behavior.

He led the small princess along with an affected, gentlemanly demeanor that didn't quite suit him yet. When getting in and out of the carriage, he offered Mirika his hand, then accompanied her into the restaurant where he'd made their reservations.

Once inside, the tiny lady and gentleman pair became the center of attention.

Everyone—aristocrats and wealthy merchants alike—all looked up from their tables at the children on their date. The two of them stood out like a sore thumb.

"Your table is ready, Lord Gurion."

As expected of one employed at such a classy establishment, the host knew to treat the young patrons as fully grown nobles and led them to the private room they had reserved.

"A toast to your brilliant blue eyes and gown."

Starting with those words, the two children fell into amiable conversation. While they talked, Laura and their guard stood by, on the alert for any problems.

"All the Royal Sorcerers were incredible," said Kunon. "Just like your vibrant hair, Princess."

The conversation progressed, and by the time appetizers were served, Mirika's nerves had eased considerably.

"I managed to pass the test," Kunon continued. "I haven't heard how the matter will be settled, but I'm sure they'll work everything out as perfectly as your lustrous, pointy nails, Your Highness."

There was no doubt, Laura thought, that if he passed the test, one of the Royal Sorcerers would become his private tutor. That was the whole reason for his visit to the castle.

It was quite a big deal for Royal Sorcerers to leave the palace. It wouldn't normally be allowed, but in this case, who could say? ...Anyhow, it wasn't

something for a lowly maid like Laura to fret over.

“I heard so many interesting stories. Oh, though your dazzling tales are just as charming, Princess. By the way, this meat is delicious, isn’t it? It has such a refreshing flavor.”

How could meat taste refreshing?

The things Kunon said didn’t always make sense, but Mirika seemed to be having fun, so Laura shrugged it off. The two of them were in their own little world at the moment. It wouldn’t be right to interfere.

Dinner gave way to dessert.

The little gentleman and lady were too young to drink—and had to make their curfew, too—so once dessert had been cleared from the table, the date was over. There would be no after-dinner show or round of fancy drinks at a bar.

Laura was relieved that the night had been uneventful.

Kunon Gurion.

Laura’s frank impression after seeing him in person was that, just like Mirika had said: He was a little odd.

And just as she let down her guard—

“This dinner is all I can manage at present. But once we’re married, we can spend every day like this. I sincerely look forward to walking through life at your side ten years from now.”

“Oh.”

Laura put a hand to her mouth to stop the small unintended gasp from escaping.



She'd been letting the boy's occasional frivolous remarks go in one ear and out the other, but what he'd said just now was surprisingly impactful. It was like a shock to her heart, and it made her feel like a young maiden again, though in truth those days were long behind her.

She looked at Mirika, who also had a hand placed over her mouth. It seemed the line had worked on her, as well. Her ears were bright red, and she gazed at Kunon with glistening eyes.

For some reason, the guard was making the same expression. Laura couldn't fathom why even he'd been so affected.

Once we're home, Laura thought, Mirika will be in quite the state. She won't sleep at all tonight.

Kunon Gurion.

He was quite the boy, indeed.



Chapter 6

A New Teacher

Before he knew it, morning had come.

Once he registered that such an incredibly enjoyable day had come to an end, Kunon felt a bit down.

The day before, he had visited the royal castle for the first time. He had talked for hours on end with sorcerers at the Black Tower—sorcerers other than Jenié! Then he had gone to dinner with Mirika as planned.

Frankly, the things he'd heard in the Black Tower had swirled around inside his head the whole night, and he didn't remember much of the date. For that, he felt a little guilty.

Kunon didn't think he'd done anything rude during dinner, but he had been so excited that he'd probably failed to pay enough attention to Mirika. Perhaps it would be a good idea to write her an apology letter.

After returning to the detached house on the Gurion estate, he had tried to collect his thoughts while reviewing his memories and the extensive notes he'd taken earlier in the day. He hadn't been able to get his mind in order, but he did jot down every idea he had into a report.

Without realizing it, he had fallen asleep over his notes, but now he was waking up in bed. Iko must have carried him there from where he had passed out at the table.

His day with the Royal Sorcerers had been positively exhilarating. And though he hadn't realized it at the time, it had really worn him out. Before he knew it, he'd drifted off to sleep, and the day was over.

Kunon's ambition and magical talent aside, he was still just a nine-year-old boy. He'd done some training, but his stamina only went so far.

"...Uh? Iko?"

"Good morning, Master Kunon."

Standing by in his room, as always, Iko answered Kunon's call.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said, "isn't it a little later than usual?"

Kunon was having an easier time waking up than he was used to. He recalled feeling similarly on days when he'd gotten a lot of sleep.

"You're right. It's a bit late."

"You should have woken me up."

Iko usually got him out of bed earlier in the day.

Kunon thought sleep was an uneconomical use of time, physical ability, and magical power. Wasn't it enough to just take a nap once he'd used up all his energy and magic?

"No way. You were up really late last night, young master. Sleeping is a child's job. It's important for your physical development."

He couldn't argue with that, however.

"Development, huh? So it's true that women prefer men to be tall and strong?"

"Some certainly do. Though, I like you whether you're big or small, Master Kunon."

"Thank you. I like yo— ...Oh my, it would be rude to Princess Mirika to say any more than that, I think."

“Hey, no fair! You’re not going to return the compliment? What a player.”

The two of them laughed, then went about starting their day.

“I’ll do my morning exercises in the afternoon today,” said Kunon. “Please start preparing breakfast.”

“As you wish.”

Kunon picked up the washbowl that had been set out for him and carried it outside. He used magic to fill it with water, then washed his face.

After brushing his teeth, Kunon used a warm A-ori to dampen his hair, then made the water evaporate as he styled it—yet another use of this versatile skill.

Kunon recalled the night before as he completed his morning routine. He couldn’t remember when he had fallen asleep, but he had a vague recollection of writing his report. At least, he thought he did.

But Kunon didn’t remember finishing it. That meant his summary of the previous day wasn’t complete. He had to put down all the valuable experiences he’d had at the Black Tower while they were still fresh in his mind, so he would never forget.

Speaking of memories, the first things to pop into his head were the three times he’d been reprimanded at the castle.

He would always remember getting in trouble, while he tended to forget the things he wanted to keep in his mind. Memory was a tricky thing.

“Okay.”

Refreshed and ready to face the day, Kunon returned to his room.

Once his report was finished, it was time for Kunon to try out the experiments he’d written about.

The time he spent testing things was enriching, but in the end, it made him hungry for a teacher’s valuable insight. That desire had only grown now that he’d spent such a satisfying, stimulating time at the Black Tower.

After several days of this—feeling engaged but ultimately unsatisfied—good news finally arrived.

“Yes! Iko, I’m getting a new teacher!”

Grand Master of the Royal Sorcerers, Londimonde, had promised to take care of finding Kunon a new instructor. And now he had sent a letter containing something for both Kunon and Iko to be excited about.

“That’s great. When are they coming?”

“Tomorrow, it says. And I think you’ll like this, Iko.”

“Oh?”

“The person you wanted to meet will be coming: Master Zeonly.”

“What?! *The* Master Zeonly?! The one rumored to be drop-dead gorgeous?”

Kunon thought back to the day he’d visited the Black Tower.

Kunon didn’t have much interest in the man—or rather, he’d been enjoying himself so much that he’d completely forgotten about Zeonly. He thought he remembered him being mentioned, however, during a moment of idle chatter. Something like “What a stroke of bad luck for Zeon, being out when such an interesting kid drops by.”

Since they had nothing to do with magic, the words hadn’t really registered with Kunon, but he vaguely recalled hearing them. It seemed the allegedly handsome Royal Sorcerer Zeonly Finroll had been absent on the day of his visit.

And now that same Zeonly would be coming to the Gurion estate to be Kunon’s teacher.

“Will it really be him?! I’ll have to do my makeup tomorrow!”

“Showing your beautiful side to someone besides me? I’ll go mad with jealousy.”

“I’m sorry, Master Kunon, there’s no time to joke around! I have to tidy up my nails! I have to cut my hair! I need to lose weight! Please excuse me!”

Iko dashed out of the room in a tizzy.

A moment passed.

“...Getting rejected by Iko kind of hurts.”

Kunon, now alone in the room, muttered sadly to himself and sighed as he put away the letter. Then he returned to writing his report on the results of the day's experiments.



Soon, the next day had come.

Kunon was waiting with his maid, who had been acting strange all morning—and the day before, too—when their guests finally arrived around midday.

“Huh?”

Standing with Iko at the entrance of the main house to greet their visitors, Kunon sensed something unexpected.

A carriage had entered the grounds and stopped a short distance away from him. That was all well and good—but aside from the coach driver, three people emerged from inside.

“Kunon!”

...And one of them was Mirika.

“Your Highness?”

Kunon wasn't expecting her that day. Mirika visited once every two weeks. Their dinner date the other night had been a special case, since Kunon happened to be at the castle. The only person he was expecting was his new magic teacher, Zeonly.

“I decided to come along!” she announced.

“Oh, okay.”

“...Oh my, aren't you happy to see me?”

Kunon responded immediately to Mirika's downcast tone.

“No, I'm just surprised to see you so unexpectedly. I must prepare my heart every time I meet with you, Princess. Running into you suddenly, I was overwhelmed by your loveliness and beauty and am at a loss for words. I feel like a hare being stared down by a fox. Though I don't really know much about

staring! Ah-ha-ha! Oh? Is that a new perfume? This one has a very nice, mature scent. It suits you well.”

“W-wow... Uh, I’ve been told I’m too young for perfume, so I never wear it... I’m using a new soap, though...”

Buffeted by a stream of words she barely understood, the bewildered Mirika only managed a bashful reply to Kunon’s last statement. Somehow, he’d managed to hide his confusion at their unplanned meeting.

Reactions in ordinary situations like this tended to linger in the mind. Kunon felt it was better to come off as a little silly than to risk leaving even the slightest of lasting wounds on a woman’s heart. Such was the spirit of a gentleman.

“Hey, Dario, there’s a brat here who seems like he’s gonna be a major playboy someday.”

“Shut up. That’s Master Kunon Gurion.”

Standing behind Mirika were two men who had gotten out of the carriage alongside her. Kunon heard one of them say something quite rude, but he ignored it. He could handle a stab at his reputation if it meant sparing a lady anguish. This, too, was the spirit of a gentleman.

“How do you do? Welcome. My name is Kunon Gurion.”

Mirika moved out of the way, allowing Kunon to take a step forward to greet the men. He wondered which one was the guest they had been waiting for.

Most likely, it was the man on the left. The man on the right’s voice sounded familiar.

“So you’re Kunon?” The man on the left spoke. “I’m Zeonly. Londimonde told me there was an interesting kid I had to meet, so I’m stopping by. Just so you know, if you don’t interest me, I won’t come again. Got it?”

“.....”

Kunon swallowed hard.

It wasn’t Zeonly’s uncouth manner that caught him off guard. What overwhelmed him, now that he could finally feel it up close, was Zeonly’s

magical power.

It was so *potent*.

His power was thick, practically viscous. If Londimonde's magic was like blue cheese, Zeonly's was like honey.

"So you're Zeonly..."

The words slipped out of Kunon's mouth unconsciously.

To be honest, the man was more incredible than Kunon had imagined. He was probably more knowledgeable about magic than any of the Royal Sorcerers Kunon had met the other day, excluding Londimonde, of course. Kunon could sense as much through his magic.

Zeonly was probably in his midtwenties, about two or three years older than Jenié. Despite his youth, he had the magical power of a much older, seasoned sorcerer.

Kunon wanted Zeonly to be his teacher. He knew it as soon as he met him.

He didn't know whether the man was as handsome as the rumors claimed, but there was no mistaking his ability. In that case, there was no reason to hesitate.

"Address me properly. Listen, I hate kids. If you start crying or screaming, I'm gonna leave right away. I didn't come here because I wanted to. Keep that in mind."

"You're saying you came because of the fetters of a hierarchical society, yes? I'm well aware of such things. I understand completely!"

"Fetters...?Ah, whatever."

A little thrown by Kunon's grin, Zeonly gave up admonishing him.

"And you there," Kunon continued. "You're the knight who looked after me the other day at the castle, correct?"

The man on the right's presence also felt familiar. Kunon immediately connected it with unpleasant memories he would rather have forgotten.

"Yes. About the other day... I'm not sure how to put this. I was just doing my

job, so let's let bygones be bygones and start over, if you don't mind."

Their only interactions had consisted of the other man scolding him, so it was naturally difficult to find the right greeting.

Kunon could say, "Thank you for looking after me," but the knight couldn't very well reply, "It was no trouble." And there was no need for him to repeat the other day's warnings here and now.

"My name is Dario Sanz," he said at last. "I'm a knight of the Third Order."

And with that, the self-introductions were over.

Kunon still didn't know why Mirika and Dario had come, but that could wait until later.

"Well then, please follow me," he said. "I live in a detached house, separate from the manor. By the way, Master Zeonly, are you as good-looking as the rumors say? I can't see, so I have no way of telling whether you have an attractive face."

"Huh? Of course I'm good-looking."

"Wow, amazing!"

"...Are you making fun of me or something?"

"Not at all. Did I offend you?"

It was true Kunon's words hadn't been rude on the surface. But something about his tone came off as oddly teasing.

Kunon was a bit different than the children Zeonly had met before, and the Royal Sorcerer was already starting to feel a little bewildered.

A table had been set up in the garden of the detached house in advance of Zeonly's arrival, since the weather was nice and the wind mild.

Kunon had been thinking they could start by discussing things over tea. And since two unexpected guests had shown up in the form of Mirika and Dario, Kunon asked Iko to add two more chairs to the table.

"Don't bother. I'm only here as Her Highness's and Zeon's escort."

Dario refused the chair at first, but in the end, he set it up away from the

table and kept watch from there. He was a proper guard, and it seemed he wanted to keep an appropriate distance.

“Did you know, Kunon?” asked Zeonly. “Royal Sorcerers aren’t allowed to travel freely. The restriction comes with their position as the top magical researchers in the country.”

“Ah, I think my father mentioned that.”

Arsan had explained this to him when Kunon expressed his desire to have a Royal Sorcerer as a tutor.

“That’s why we need an escort. Information about magic is valuable, you know. It’s not uncommon for Royal Sorcerers to become targets.”

Information on magic available to the public tended to be limited to what had been presented worldwide. Or else it consisted of unreliable hypotheses still in need of experiments and trials—or wild new theories.

Other information had to be gleaned from original research, the results of which were monopolized by the country or organization employing the sorcerers involved, or sometimes by the individual magic users themselves.

Such information was closely guarded, and there were those in the field who would do anything to get it.

Someone looking to make a profit might try to kidnap a Royal Sorcerer, who was sure to be in possession of a great deal of valuable magical knowledge. This wasn’t a problem for ordinary sorcerers, like Jenié, who live outside the castle, however.

“So why did you come, Princess?” asked Kunon.

“To justify a Royal Sorcerer leaving the castle,” she replied. “Officially speaking, Master Zeonly and Sir Dario are here as my escorts while I visit the Gurion estate.”

“Ah, I see. That makes sense.”

“The whole thing seems a little forced, and I don’t really understand the details, but... We needed a suitable reason for a Royal Sorcerer to travel.”

It seemed Zeonly hadn’t openly come in his capacity as a Royal Sorcerer,

either. From an outsider's perspective, the group probably looked like two guards escorting the young princess.

"So you accompanied Master Zeonly for my sake. You have my thanks, Your Highness."

"I-it's fine... I also wanted to see you, so..."

"And I you, my dear princess."

"Hey, cut it out. I'm sitting right here. I don't wanna watch you brats flirt."

Zeonly, who had been quietly drinking his tea, interrupted their conversation before it veered off course.

"You get why we're all here now, yeah? I think it's about time for you and Big Bro to have a fun little chat about magic. Okay, twerp?"

"Yes, by all means. Please."

At this point, the mood of the two sorcerers shifted. Or Kunon's did, at least. He had been sporting his usual carefree attitude up until then. Now, however, his unseeing silver eyes were fixed on Zeonly.

The man was smirking indiscreetly, plainly intent on making a fool out of the innocent boy in front of him—quite the mean-spirited "big bro." The only one present who hadn't yet realized that was Kunon, who couldn't see his face.

"I see no reason for us to go over the basics," said Zeonly. "Let's skip all that and get straight to the practical stuff."

"Understood."

"How many sections can you do in compound spells?"

"Thirty-one."

"What?"

"Thirty-two if I push myself. But that doesn't always work."

"...Huh. Not bad."

So that's it, thought Zeonly, finally understanding. This was the reason he had been ordered to come meet Kunon.

Zeonly's colleagues had spoken to him of Kunon's knowledge and abilities. It had sounded like nonsense, but apparently Kunon was the real deal.

If what the others had said was true, this kid was exactly who Zeonly needed for his experiments, research, and trials. He'd been convinced he didn't need any assistants or pupils, but he wasn't so against the idea as to totally refuse.

Teachers helped their pupils grow, and pupils assisted their teachers. The relationship was mutually beneficial, and Zeonly had no reason to turn down something that might benefit him.

"I mean, I can do fifty, but whatever."

"Fifty?! That many?! How?!"

"I'm the one asking the questions here. How did you get past the thirty-section—or even twenty-section—hurdle? That's not something you learn on your own. And the person who taught you magic couldn't do it, either, right?"

"I overlay the symbols. I typically do it twofold."

"...So you came up with that on your own, huh? Hah, you're something else, kid."

For the first time, Zeonly's smile took on a different cast.

The boy was unmistakably gifted—a rare find. He now understood why the other Royal Sorcerers all wanted Kunon as their student. Zeonly was starting to feel the same way.

"The person who taught you magic was Jenié Kors, right?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"Nah, I've only heard of her. I think she's a good teacher for a beginner. There are levels to everything, and if you try to skip up two or three out of nowhere, you won't understand what you're doing. Sometimes, the better a sorcerer is, the worse they are at teaching people. I'd probably be awful at teaching a beginner. I was great from the start, so I wouldn't understand the struggles of a newbie."

Zeonly sure had a way of sprinkling self-praise into whatever he was saying.

That aside, considering Kunon's current abilities, Jenié Kors's methods had clearly worked. Even if Kunon was naturally skilled, it was undoubtedly Jenié who had nurtured his talent to the point where he was able to secure a meeting with the Royal Sorcerers. An excellent sorcerer was not necessarily an excellent magic teacher.

"Right," said Zeonly. "I have a pretty good idea of what you can do. Now, why don't you show me."

"First, please teach me how to do fifty sections."

"Nope. What's the point of teaching that to someone who can't even do it? I'm not in the habit of wasting time. Ask me again after you've proven you're good enough. You'll have to beg me, though."

"Please teach me, handsome Master Zeonly. I do so wish to see my master's abilities in action. I'd also appreciate a glimpse of your generosity, your kindness, your loveliness, and the way you sometimes look off into the distance with a lonely glint in your eye. Not that I can see any of it, of course."

"I'm not even sure where to start with all that, so I'll just pretend I didn't hear it. First off, stop calling me your master. I haven't agreed to anything yet. And I'll go ahead and give you a small taste of my power as part of your assignment. Okay?"

No sooner had Zeonly finished speaking than a dirt wall rose up from the ground right next to the table.

Kunon reacted faster than anyone else and turned to face the wall. He had followed the shift in Zeonly's magic.

"I have a three-star earth crest. It's easy to think of soil as plain and boring, but there's a lot more to it... Remember that. You can make a bed out of water, right? Do it. I'm gonna nap. In the meantime, I want you to try breaking that wall with magic. That's your assignment. If you can't do it, this ends here. No second chances."

I bet he'll do it, too, Zeonly thought.

His expectations high, Zeonly sunk into the Supersoft-Body A-ori Kunon had created. As he did, he let out a little "*Whoa!*" of surprise despite himself.

It was a lot softer than he had imagined, like jumping into a fluffy pile of feathers, and it made his body feel weightless. It was also strange to be touching water without getting wet. The sphere was even warm to compensate for the winter weather.

The fatigue and sleep deprivation that Zeonly had been pretending not to feel sunk their teeth into his consciousness and wouldn't let go.

Unable—no, unwilling to fight it off, Zeonly was asleep in no time. As he drifted into unconsciousness, he decided he would *have* to get one of his colleagues to learn how to do this.

His interest shifting away from Zeonly, Kunon went to touch the towering dirt wall. It was like a single wooden board made of hardened soil.

The wall was a rectangle, not too thick, precisely shaped and measured as if prepared by a carpenter. It didn't budge at all when pushed on—and produced only a hard knocking sound when he tapped on it with his cane.

Kunon suspected that even if he swung at it with all his might, the wall wouldn't crack. On the contrary, it would probably break his cane to try.

It was a tremendously solid structure, smooth to the touch, and seemed to be made only of simple dry dirt. But the magic holding it together was incredible.

Just like Kunon's A-ori, the wall was an independent form with its own store of magic split off and tucked inside it. Rather than continuously consuming magic, it had been filled with power when it was made. The wall would keep standing until either its creator dispelled it or its supply of magic power ran out.

From what Kunon could sense, this wall would probably last for about two days. Kunon could sustain his spells for half a day at most. This wall alone had already given him a good idea of Zeonly's abilities.

Any of the Royal Sorcerers, not just Zeonly, would have a lot to teach Kunon. But this man's magic stood out even among the likes of his peers. No wonder he was prone to singing his own praises. As a sorcerer, Zeonly was leagues ahead of Kunon.

“...I see.”

There were things to learn even just from touching the wall.

The magic within was considerably condensed. Condensing it like this both extended the spell's duration and preserved the wall's solidity.

Packing magic tightly into one's spells must be common practice among sorcerers. Kunon had reached the same conclusion through his own reasoning, but such techniques must be the norm.

That said, this density was on a whole nother level. It was the product of a compound spell with over forty sections. How had Zeonly managed so many...?

Magic was all about symbols—in other words, magic circles. That was how spells were derived. When drawn with magic power, magic circles emitted that power *in the shape they were made*, and the result was called a spell.

Sorcerers used various spells by rearranging magic circles. Many magic circles assembled with specific words had been discovered and disseminated, but those were just foundations, known as standard magic.

The true essence of magic was in the unique spells sorcerers developed out of this standard magic—those specialized with *character*.

Compound magic was about dividing the base symbol—the magic circle—into as many sections as possible and reconstructing it. In other words, it was about altering standard spells over and over.

The number of divisions and reconstructions corresponded to the spell's depth of character and its caster's magical ability. The higher the number, the greater the difficulty and the trickier the spell was to control. Failure was common. That was what trials were for.

Kunon had managed to overcome the “twenty-section hurdle,” as Zeonly called it, by tightly stacking one base magic circle on top of another.

As a result, when Kunon created an A-ori, he was essentially casting two of the same spells at once, each with ten sections.

“.....”

Kunon glanced back at the sleeping Zeonly, engulfed in the Supersoft-Body A-ori, and heaved a small sigh before returning to the table.

“Let’s chat for a while, Princess,” he said.

“Huh?”

When the conversation turned to magic, Mirika had simply watched without butting in unnecessarily. She was surprised to see Kunon sit back down.

She wanted to ask if it was all right for him to take a break, but she didn’t. After all, she had no understanding of magic.

Zeonly seemed pretty worn-out, and he’d only just gotten to sleep. Kunon couldn’t bring himself to wake the man right away, so he decided to kill some time.

He’d understood as soon as he touched it—Kunon could destroy a wall like that with ease.

“...Huh?!”

Zeonly let out a yelp as he snapped awake.

“Yeesh, I totally passed out... Ow.”

It was difficult to stand up after being ensconced in the squishy mass of the Supersoft-Body A-ori. Zeonly managed to roll out of the sphere, landing on the ground before getting to his feet.

He hadn’t expected to fall so deeply asleep that he’d completely lose consciousness. At most, Zeonly had hoped to get in a light nap.

The sky was still blue. He couldn’t have been out for very long.

“Did you sleep well?” Kunon asked.

Mirika and Dario, however, looked aghast. Both of their faces seemed to say, “This guy actually fell asleep?”

But Zeonly didn’t let trivial matters like that get to him.

“Hey, brat. You’re looking awfully calm. You give up on breaking down the wall?”

Kunon was sitting at the table, having a pleasant conversation with Mirika.

Zeonly sat back in his seat at the table without waiting to be invited, then

snatched up one of the scones the children were having. The man had no manners.

The dirt wall he had made for the assignment was still standing.

“Oh, is it okay for me to destroy it now?”

“Huh? Yeah, go ahead. If you think you can—”

Kunon lifted a hand toward the wall, and a stream of bubbles spread out from his palm, covering the structure’s surface in little suds.

A-rubu.

This was a cleansing spell that generated tiny bubbles to lift the dirt from an object and one of the fundamental spells of water magic.

“...Pfft.”

Zeonly snorted into his tea—a black tea prepared for the group by Kunon’s overly dolled-up maid. He was smiling. He looked pleased.

“You understood the goal of the assignment, then?”

“I expect the dirt wall becomes extremely fragile if you allow it to be oversaturated with water, yes? I realized it immediately, since it was as dry as that hardtack stuff they make to break people’s teeth.”

“That’s not what hardtack is for; however, in general, you got it. But why use A-rubu? Your specialty is shape-shifting A-ori, right? I thought you’d bring it down after some trial and error with your go-to move.”

A number of failed attempts with A-ori would have destroyed the wall, too. As long as one kept trying, it would eventually be brought down.

Zeonly had heard that Kunon didn’t know any offensive magic yet, so he’d prepared a wall that could be demolished through means other than direct impact—an assignment the boy was capable of completing.

However, he had probably intended the amount of magic necessary to saturate the wall to be nearly equal to the total amount of Kunon’s magic power, so that he would only succeed after mustering all his strength.

It would have been a difficult task if Kunon had opted for such a simple,

straightforward method.

“I thought this way would be easier.”

Just as the words left Kunon’s mouth, the upper portion of the wall started to crumble along with the bubbles. Each bubble working on the wall entrapped a small amount of dirt and lifted it away from the structure. The spell recognized the dirt wall itself as something to be cleaned.

“Easy, huh...? Not bad. I’m not interested in brainless, brute-force approaches. This kind of clever workaround is more like it. There’s a spell for every situation and subject. Being a sorcerer is about figuring out exactly what to use and when. Leave the flashy moves and useless attacks to the fire crest idiots.”

“So you’ll accept me as your student? Hooray!”

“Hold on! I still haven’t said yes!”

“But you will, won’t you? I completed the assignment, and I was clever, too.”

“...Tsk. Guess I’ve got no choice.”

Kunon’s straightforward enthusiasm made Zeonly want to resist... But a promise was a promise. Mirika, Dario, and even Kunon’s dolled-up maid were all scowling at Zeonly as if daring him to argue any further. He wasn’t scared of them, but if he caused a scene, it’d only come back to bite him.

“Kunon, starting today, you’re my disciple. You better be grateful. You’ve got to be the luckiest kid in the world right now, since you have *me* as your teacher.”

Zeonly Finroll.

Meeting him was a major turning point for Kunon, but the same could be said for Zeonly. From that day onward, the latter’s name and ever-growing list of accomplishments would become known all over the world.

But there was someone else, too, who reached a major turning point that day.

“Ha-ha, the luckiest kid in the world... It’s true. I’ve found a teacher, and I have Princess Mirika at my side. What more could I want?”

“Kunon, please...,” said Mirika.

“You probably know this,” interrupted Zeonly, “but lemme say it anyway. Your teacher takes precedence over your fiancée.”

“*What?*”

Mirika stared at Zeonly. Kunon had never heard her speak in such a low tone before. He thought she sounded just like a demon escaped from the depths of hell.

Iko had told him women were scary when they were angry. It seemed she was right. This was his first time experiencing Mirika’s anger, and she sure was frightening... Though, to Kunon, Mirika’s anger was special—much scarier than anyone else’s.

“He can focus on love when he’s an adult,” said Zeonly. “Now that he’s my disciple, Kunon’s going to magic school for sure. He’s got all kinds of stuff to do before then. There’s no limit to what I can teach him, and he’ll be helping me with experiments, too. He won’t have time to play around. And anyway, what are *you* going to do, Princess Mirika?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if you’re fine with just sitting back and watching while your *boyfriend* works himself to the bone. Don’t you have something you should be doing, too? He’s *my* disciple, y’know? From now on, Kunon is gonna keep improving, succeeding, and racking up accolades. He might even earn a peerage. *Who knows how long he’ll stay your boyfriend?* He won’t be as popular as me, but before you know it, girls will start lining up for Kunon. You get it, don’t you, Ninth Princess?”

“Hngh...!”

Mirika gritted her teeth and swallowed her objection.

As soon as she heard “girls will start lining up for Kunon,” the faces of her own sisters appeared in her mind.

As the ninth princess, Mirika’s position in the royal family was particularly weak. And because her elder brothers and sisters had more influence and liked

to throw their weight around, she had no chance in the information war going on in the royal family.

If her sisters really did set their sights on Kunon—on the ninth princess's fiancé—Mirika would most likely lose him. She wouldn't even be able to put up a fight.

It was just as Zeonly said. He was exactly, hopelessly right.

Kunon was rapidly distinguishing himself as a magic user and had progressed enough to become the disciple of a Royal Sorcerer.

And what was Mirika doing?

She had gotten her education, as was expected of someone in her position, but that was all.

Mirika hadn't earned anyone's recognition. She didn't have any goals. She had simply resigned herself to life as a low-ranking princess who didn't even merit having a guard with her at school.

When she really thought about it, something dawned on her—she was no longer good enough for Kunon.

When she was younger, Mirika had run from him, despairing at being his fiancée. Now things were different. Kunon was leaving Mirika behind.

She hadn't realized it before because whenever she called out, Kunon had always turned back to look at her. But the truth was that there was already a huge distance between them—a distance wide enough for someone else to occupy.

If someone wanted to, they could fill that gap easily.

There were likely quite a few people who already recognized Kunon's value—his high probability of success—far better than a low-ranking nobody like herself.

"Master, please don't tease Her Highness."

"I'm not trying to tease her. I'm actually cheering her on because I think you guys make such a good couple."

Zeonly wasn't lying. He might sound like he was trying to mess with them, but everything he said was true. Though he *had* made the comment half in jest.

"You say that," said Kunon, "but I bet you like teasing girls, don't you? You seem like the type."

"Huh?"

"You don't say what you mean, and by the time you realize it, you're too late, right? Because you're not good at showing affection, you bully the girls you like and then someone else comes in and steals them."

"....."

Kunon was talking baseless, childish nonsense. It wasn't worth taking seriously.

Upon reflection, however, Zeonly was a tad frustrated to find the boy wasn't entirely wrong.

And so Zeonly's first visit came to an end.

This was Kunon's turning point, and the start of a period of rapid progress in Zeonly's experiments and research.

And—

"...I have to do something."

—the moment a fire was lit in the heart of Ninth Princess Mirika Hughlia.



Kunon celebrated his tenth birthday at the end of spring.

His daily life had become so busy that he only remembered it was his birthday when his family voiced their well-wishes.

Three months had passed since he became Zeonly's disciple. The days dissolved into one another in the blink of an eye, like a sugar cube dropped into a cup of hot tea.

"It seems like you're more of an assistant than a disciple," said Iko.

"That's true," Kunon replied. "I didn't think he was going to work me this

hard.”

“It’s almost like your job is making clean drafts of manuscripts.”

“You’re right. Maybe next time he’s here, I’ll ask Master to pay me for my work.”

Kunon sat back to take a break, sipping some tea Iko had brewed for him.

Every morning, he woke up and toiled away all day in his room doing paperwork. He kept at it until evening, when he switched to physical and magical training until nighttime. Then, when his training was done, he collapsed into bed and fell asleep. As of late, that was his everyday routine.

Zeonly really did work his student to the bone. Every few days, he would send Kunon more documents. As a result, Kunon had a new reason for remaining in the detached house.

Zeonly kept sending more and more notes, scribbles, and hastily scrawled ideas about magic—which he called “reports”—with instructions for Kunon to compile them and make clean copies. Kunon’s room was now full of such writings.

For those in the know, each of these was like a leather pouch full of gold coins. Any documents produced by a Royal Sorcerer, even scribbled notes, were top secret and strictly confidential.

As long as Kunon’s room was overflowing with such things, he needed to keep other people away from it as much as possible. He was now more tethered to the detached house than ever.

Basically, the only person who came and went from the building was Iko. Kunon saw his family only when summoned, and he always went to them. He’d told them not to visit his room unless absolutely necessary.

“There sure are a lot of pictures on these.”

Iko could read simple words, but naturally, she didn’t understand documents full of technical terms. The ones Zeonly sent, however, were covered in pictures. There were some she could understand and others that were complete nonsense to her.

It also wasn't unusual for Zeonly's writing to be scrawled so messily that it was illegible. Frankly, Kunon had a more difficult time deciphering the man's chicken scratch than compiling clean copies of the reports.

"Magical engineers sure seem like interesting people, huh?" said Iko.

Magical engineer—that was Zeonly's role as a Royal Sorcerer.

He also performed ordinary earth sorcerer tasks, such as making molds and repairing buildings, but he had set his sights on magical engineering—creating magic tools—as his main work.

Magic tools were implements that moved when magic power was channeled through them. Because they required magic to function, their use wasn't very widespread at present. The term *magic tool* was fairly well-known, but that was all.

Zeonly's goal was to create magic tools that even an average person could use. Specifically, he was working on sculpting tools using earth magic. This process was somewhat similar to what Kunon did with his A-ori.

"That must be why Londimonde introduced us," Zeonly had once explained.

Kunon agreed.

The more he read Zeonly's notes and learned about the role of an engineer, the more he thought that had to be the case. How like the Grand Master to take such things into consideration.

"I can't make heads or tails of any of this," admitted Iko. "But if you're satisfied, then so am I."

"Really? I have your support?"

"Of course! I'm here to help out with your daily needs, so you can focus on your work and make your dreams come true! After all, I know better than anyone how talented you are!"

"You sound like the burdened lover of a struggling actor," Kunon retorted.

"If you get famous, will you cast me aside?"

"I would never! You and I are one, Iko. Let's get married someday."

“Oof, what a stiff delivery! I don’t believe a word.”

The two of them had a laugh.

And then Kunon went back to work.

Mirika’s visits increased from once every two weeks to once per week, and she always arrived with the same group of three: herself, Zeonly, and Dario—the knight serving as both observer and guard. Mirika provided an excuse to bring along Zeonly, who was ostensibly here for her protection.

This was because Zeonly taking Kunon as his disciple was being kept under wraps as much as possible. Kunon didn’t fully understand why, but it seemed to have something to do with the complex issue of royal succession.

“Hey there, darling disciple. Are you finished making the copies?”

Zeonly arrived in good spirits.

Thanks to foisting his paperwork onto his pupil for the past three months, he had managed to totally fix his lack of sleep. His mood was much improved.

“I’m about halfway done,” Kunon replied.

“What? Stop dragging your feet. Get it together.”

As if a never-ending stack of paperwork that kept on growing was something Kunon could finish. But he had grown accustomed to his teacher’s unreasonable demands.

“Did you get my message?” he asked.

“...You gotta stop writing stuff like ‘I love you, Master,’ and ‘I respect you so much’ in the margins. It’s really embarrassing to show that stuff to Londimonde and the other Royal Sorcerers.”

“What’s embarrassing about being close with your favorite student? Don’t worry about it. Let’s show off our great relationship.”

“The ones who wanted you for themselves won’t stop harassing me.”

“Welcome, Princess Mirika,” said Kunon, turning toward her.

“Hello, Kunon.”

“Hey... Hey! You’ve got some nerve, ignoring your master.”

As soon as greetings were over, Zeonly and Kunon began their experiments. There were so many things they wanted to test out, and the time they spent together once a week was extremely precious to both of them.

The paperwork was Zeonly’s way of teaching his student. Kunon had to understand the meaning and purpose of the notes, then rewrite them in simpler terms. That way, it stuck fast in his memory.

The messy, scribbled writing encouraged Kunon to hypothesize what was being said based on his reasoning skills and understanding of the topic. If he was following the content, he could make an educated guess.

They could meet only once a week, so they didn’t have time for lectures. That’s why Zeonly was using this format to pass his knowledge on to Kunon. Well, that and because it allowed him to push a bothersome task off on someone else.

“What do you think of this?” Zeonly asked.

“I think there’s too much pressure. It might work if we strengthen the vessel or reduce the amount of imbued magic.”

“But it won’t move right with less magical pressure.”

The fact that Kunon could follow their conversations without much input from Zeonly was proof of his method’s success. A novice who hadn’t known the first thing about magical engineering three months ago, Kunon was now able to keep up while discussing the matter with an expert.

Kunon knew this was all thanks to his master’s teaching, even if the amount of work he’d been given was so unreasonable he was starting to think the man owed him wages.

“Okay, let’s try to make one. I’ll leave the internal mechanism up to you.”

“Understood.”

Zeonly used earth magic to make the general framework for the device, and Kunon improvised the inner workings using A-ori.

Zeonly was able to make the hard components, but the flexible parts were a

challenge for him. That was where Kunon came in.

As Zeonly and Kunon immersed themselves in constructing a prototype for their experiment, Mirika and Dario stood facing each other a short distance away.

“Let’s have a good match!”

“Indeed.”

The two readied themselves, wooden swords in hand.

Three months ago, Mirika had asked Dario to start teaching her how to use a sword.

Her goal was to graduate at the top of her class at the senior school for nobles, which she had just started attending. But before that, if possible, she wanted to transfer to the knighthood course.

For that purpose, she had started devoting herself to her studies. In addition, she had begun learning all kinds of swordplay.

She wanted to be able to protect Kunon, just in case.



Chapter 7

Kunon, the Sorcerer's Disciple, Can See...?

“Kunon, I think it’s about time,” said Zeonly.

“Pardon?”

It was the second winter since they’d met.

Kunon’s life had been unimaginably busy since he became Zeonly’s disciple. The days and months seemed to flow one into the next, and Kunon had all but forgotten about things like calendars and dates.

He had no clue what day it was, or what month, or even whether it was spring or autumn. His only concept of the passage of time was the temperature of the air on his skin.

Early that summer, he’d turned eleven. But aside from that, nothing special had happened.

Every few days, Zeonly sent him more reports to copy, and their time together was spent on experiments, prototypes, and testing. Each day was the same, and Kunon devoted himself to the work at hand.

That day, Zeonly had come to visit. As always, Mirika and Dario were with

him. Kunon had thought they would spend the time as usual, experimenting and testing.

However—

“It’s been almost two years since you became my disciple, and you’ll be twelve at the end of spring. It’s time to start preparing for magic school. It starts in the fall, and you need to get ready.”

“...Huh?”

For a moment, Kunon didn’t understand what Zeonly was saying.

“But what about the testing? What about the development of the Chest that Draws in a Bunch of Bugs?”

“Don’t call it that; it’s not cool. Call it the Insect Box.”

The item in question was a magic tool used to attract certain kinds of bugs. They intended it to be for collecting beneficial insects like honeybees, but it could also be used to exterminate pests.

The box was on the verge of completion, and Kunon had brainstormed various experiments in anticipation of finishing it up that very day.

And yet...

“Then what will we do about the Bunch of Insects Box?”

“Don’t just mix the names together! And I can finish it by myself. You have other things to do.”

As he spoke, Zeonly picked up the stack of copies Kunon had set on the table outside. It seemed he was already planning to leave, though he had only just arrived.

“Other things to do? ...You mean preparing for magic school?”

Kunon had forgotten all about magic school.

He’d been so busy the past two years. Busy but fulfilled. There hadn’t been time to think about anything else.

It had been a lot of work, but he didn’t have many complaints. He was pressed for time and drowning in paperwork every day, but it was fun to learn

new things.

And making magic tools was interesting. He had already contributed to the completion of a few, but Kunon felt he still had more to offer.

To be honest, Kunon would rather keep working as Zeonly's assistant and not go to magic school. But even as he thought this, Kunon somehow knew he wouldn't have his way.

He had come to understand Zeonly's disposition fairly well over the last two years. The man had a flexible way of thinking and was open to hearing his disciple's opinions, but he almost never went back on an order.

And his orders were always, without exception, given with his disciple's best interests in mind.

Zeonly was ordering Kunon to go to magic school. He must believe doing so would be good for his student.

"Master, I..."

Kunon had no clue what magic school was like, so he didn't know how to object.

"Don't try to get out of it," Zeonly said. "I can't teach you water magic; I can only help you improve your foundations. But I intend to see you develop completely. So go learn some water magic at school, then come back."

When he put it like that, how could Kunon refuse?

It was true, Kunon hadn't learned a single thing about water magic during the past two years. He could do more things with the spells he already knew, but he hadn't learned any more—he was still stuck at two.

...He couldn't afford to let things stay as they were. Though Kunon didn't personally believe he needed to learn any more.

"...I don't want to be apart from Her Highness," he said.

Hughlia didn't have a magic school. He would have to travel to another country to attend. And once there, he'd be staying a few years at least...until either he passed the graduation exam or dropped out. He wouldn't be able to come home very easily. In other words, he wouldn't be able to see Mirika.

“Kunon, you should go.”

On the verge of turning fourteen, Mirika’s voice was no longer that of a little girl. Now she sounded like a young woman.

“I’ll be waiting. Come home as soon as you’re done.”

“You’re fine with not being able to see me, Princess?”

“Of course not.” Her answer was immediate. “But you should go anyway.”

That sentiment came quickly as well.

“I’ll send you tons of letters, so write back to me often, okay?”

Somehow, Mirika seemed to have already prepared herself for this.

“Kunon.”

He hadn’t intended to let his reluctance show on his face, but it came out in his mood and his tone. Mirika clasped Kunon’s left hand in both of her own.

Her hands were small, but her palms were calloused. She had continued her swordplay training all this time.

“I promise to become a woman you can be proud of. So you have to do the same and become a great sorcerer. I don’t want to watch a selfish, tyrannical teacher push you around forever, you know.”

“Hey,” Zeonly interjected.

“Come now,” said Kunon. “I love my master. He’s caring in his own way.”

“Oh yeah?” said Zeonly. “Can’t say I love that attitude of yours, though.”

“Ah, how cruel. I guess I’ll have to add that nice scent component to the waterbed again next time and make sure you get a nice, sound sleep.”

“...Just kidding. Don’t do that again.”

Zeonly had nicknamed this particular invention the Diabolical Bed Guaranteed to Make You Lose Half a Day. He said it was so comfortable it was actually a problem.

But that aside—

“Okay, Master. I’ll go to magic school.”

Zeonly wanted him to go, and Mirika agreed, so there was no reason to object. It wouldn't change anything anyway.

Besides, Kunon would be lying if he said he wasn't interested. Going to magic school would allow him to discover new depths to the field of magic. How could he not be curious?

"So what do I need to prepare?" he asked. "A change of clothes?"

"Can't you just get clothes there?" replied Zeonly.

"I can't sleep unless I'm wearing my usual pajamas. I'll need underwear, too."

"Then bring them! What a pain. Bring your whole wardrobe if you want to."

"But if I fail the entrance exam, I'll have to come right back home. I can't bring that much luggage..."

"You won't fail. I know you'll pass both the practical and written portions with flying colors. I didn't train you so you could mess up a test meant for kids. If you do fail somehow, there could only be one reason."

"What's that?"

"They might think you're cheating. In that case, I'd go to the school to negotiate with them directly."

"All for the sake of your dearest disciple?"

"For the sake of my excellent reputation. Anyway, you have what it takes to pass the exam."

What Zeonly didn't mention out loud was the possibility someone would fail Kunon to get back at *him*. He suspected there were still quite a few people there who knew him, and he was aware that his personality had earned him a lot of resentment. Reflecting on it now, perhaps he'd overdone things a little. He felt a twinge of regret, but not much.

"Anyway, there's something a lot more important than all that."

"Huh?"

Kunon cocked his head to one side, puzzled.

The most important thing he could think of was his fiancée, Mirika. That, and

Iko's instruction to "always be a gentleman with a good sense of humor."

"You...seriously don't remember? Come on, I knew I had a pretty easygoing disciple, but this is a bit much. You need to straighten out your priorities!"

"Pardon me, but I always aim to be a gentleman of good humor. I would never forget this most important teaching."

"...I don't mean to complain, but couldn't you have picked something I said as your most important teaching..."

Zeonly sighed. He looked a little hurt.

"...Your eyes," he said finally.

As soon as he heard those words, Kunon's heart leaped into his throat.

...Oh, right.

That's right!

How could he forget?

In the hustle and bustle of his everyday life, he'd forgotten his dearest wish, his ambition, his very reason for living.

It had to be because there was so much he could do without being able to see. Somewhere in his heart, he had started to think things might be fine as they were.

He really was too easygoing. He'd been so thoughtless and foolish, even Kunon himself was surprised.

Zeonly was right—his priorities were totally out of line.

"You get what I'm saying, right? *Don't you think you could do it now?* I've taught you everything I can—compound spells with fifty-five sections, three-dimensional magic circles, anchored cylindrical magic circles, imaginary circuits, rheologic sand patterns. And you already have experience *making magic tools*, right?"

Kunon gasped.

It had never occurred to him that *that* was a piece of the puzzle.

With his sights set once more on his goal, scattered encounters and bits of information started to come together, suddenly forming one complete picture.

Magic tools. Magical engineering. Meeting Zeonly.

All of it—every single thing—was the work of Grand Master Londimonde, whom Kunon had met only once: the single time he'd traveled to the royal castle.

He knew about Kunon's goal. He had asked the day they met, and Kunon had answered.

Londimonde's response had been to send him Zeonly, the exact person Kunon needed to guide him. Kunon realized now that everything in the last two years—since the day he met Londimonde—had gone precisely as the Grand Master had envisioned.

He could picture the older man playing around in the Supersoft-Body A-ori like it was yesterday.

All that mattered now was whether Kunon was up to the challenge.

"...Master, I need some time to myself."

He had just been a little forgetful. In the depths of Kunon's heart, his ambition still burned brightly. The fire was simply in need of a little stoking.

The yearning he had forgotten now blazed in his chest, unbelievably hot.

"Got it," said Zeonly. "Call for me when you're ready. You can ask me for advice, too. I'll make sure you succeed... Though, I'm sure you can handle it."

Zeonly patted Kunon's head. The latter's unseeing eyes smoldered with intent.

"You're *my* disciple, after all, and I'm proud of you. There's no way you'll fail."

The past two years hadn't been wasted. Kunon's knowledge was vast. He had learned the art of magical engineering.

Before, he had been lacking in every aspect, and his goal had felt utterly out of reach.

But that was then. Now—



“...*Waaah*... I, *hic*, hate this...”

“Hey, you’re being annoying— *Ow!*”

Dario, seated across from Zeonly, kicked him in the leg just as he started to complain.

They were in the carriage on their way back to the castle, the same day Kunon had decided to attend magic school.

Mirika was beside herself. All she could do was cry. Or rather, sob.

She had put her whole heart into encouraging Kunon to go to school, telling herself, “This won’t be such a big deal.” ...But in fact, this turn of events was so painful she might have fallen to her knees at any moment.

Kunon was going to gain his eyesight with magic.

Her fiancé may have gotten waylaid by the chaos of everyday life, but Mirika never once forgot his goal. What’s more, she was thinking ahead.

What would happen if Kunon could see? Could they really go on as they were now?

Kunon was already way out ahead of her in life. If he could see, too, what reason would he have to stay with someone like her?

Would he start looking at other girls?

She was only the ninth princess—with such little power and sway she might as well not even be royalty. Wouldn’t it be better to marry into the house of a duke? That would ensure a much greater social status and stronger political support.

As he was now, she had no doubt Kunon would achieve whatever goal he strove for.

Zeonly had made incredible strides in the field of magical engineering these past two years. Their relationship as master and disciple wasn’t public, but Kunon was behind all that success.

Zeonly’s list of accomplishments was amazing. He had developed seven new

magic tools, published five new magical theories, and produced a manual detailing how to efficiently conduct magical experiments and trials. His name was known and celebrated not only in Hughlia but all over the world. He had also grown in popularity with the ladies.



There was no way Kunon, who had acted as Zeonly's right-hand man the whole time, wouldn't be recognized for his work.

In effect, he already had an impressive record. If his accomplishments were made public, his contributions would be so great he might receive a peerage.

What Zeonly had predicted two years ago was already coming to fruition. And Kunon would probably only accumulate more achievements at magic school.

The girls around him wouldn't be able to keep their hands off him.

He may seem frivolous at times, but Mirika knew that Kunon was a very sincere person at heart. If he wasn't, he would have long ago abandoned the burdensome paperwork Zeonly dumped into his lap.

If Kunon advanced any further, Mirika might not be able to catch up.

"Sir Dario..."

"Yes?"

"I can't help thinking it'd be better if Kunon never got his sight... I'm so despicable..."

"You sure are," said Zeonly. "How rotten...! Ow, hey!"

Dario delivered a second kick and glared at the other man, his eyes as cold as ice.

"You can either shut your mouth or allow me to shut it for you," he said. "Which will it be?"

He was serious.

Clicking his tongue, Zeonly turned to stare out the window.

"Listen, Your Highness," said Dario. "The human heart contains both lightness and darkness. You mustn't ignore the darkness or seek out only the lightness. But at the same time, you cannot allow either to swallow you whole."

"It isn't just your body that you've been training these past two years. No matter how much doubt you feel, or how many dishonorable thoughts flash through your mind, you have the ability to choose the correct path. It's all right. As long as such sentiments remain in your head, they're nothing but flights of

fancy.”

Dario was, at present, a kind of swordplay tutor for Mirika. He held much the same position for her as Jenié and Zeonly did for Kunon. Dario and Mirika couldn't claim to be master and pupil, due to their respective positions and social statuses, but in spirit, their bond was the same.

Zeonly knew this.

“Aren't you being too lenient?” he said.

“Actually, I think you're being too harsh,” Dario replied.

There were as many kinds of teachers as there were students, and the relationship between them was also one between people. Since there was no “correct” way for two humans to relate to each other, Dario and Zeonly would never agree, because they both thought that they were right.

“Anyway, Zeon, didn't you say before that you weren't sure how Master Kunon could gain his sight?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Do you think he can do it? Will Master Kunon be able to see?”

“...I'm not sure.”

Zeonly's careless reply irritated Dario, and he wasn't the only one upset.

“Are you saying you lied to him?!”

Mirika's anger was even stronger—as strong as her feelings on the matter. She had only just lamented the idea of Kunon being able to see, but when it came down to it, Zeonly's attitude infuriated her. At her core, she was undoubtedly a good person.

“I haven't heard of anything similar happening in the past, so how could I know? I even did some research, but I couldn't find a single example. So from here on out, it all depends on Kunon.”

Zeonly looked back out the window.

“In the end, he's the only one who knows exactly what he needs and what his circumstances are. This is his problem alone. Always has been.”

His expression was serious as he spoke.

“I did everything I could. I don’t know how to make eyeballs—I could only teach him stuff that *might* be helpful, like theory and how to make magic tools. Whatever happens, happens. There’s no use in him—or anyone around him—getting all dire.”

Though he didn’t realize it, of the three people in the carriage, the one with the gravest expression was Zeonly himself.



“Iko, at your service.”

That night, Iko went to the main house on the Gurion estate to make a report.

She knocked on the office door of the family patriarch, Arsan. Then, with his permission, she went inside.

“It’s been a while,” he said.

“So it has.”

Iko had made considerably fewer reports to Arsan in the last two years—ever since Kunon had become Zeonly’s apprentice.

That was because Kunon hadn’t been doing anything new.

Every day he did paperwork, exercised, and practiced magic. Once a week, he had tea with Mirika and developed magic tools with Zeonly. And that was it, repeated ad infinitum.

“Let’s hear it.”

Arsan put away the documents he’d been holding, then looked across his desk at Iko.

“Master Zeonly has instructed Kunon to attend magic school. Master Kunon accepted the order and is aiming to start next year.”

“He made up his mind, huh?”

In truth, Arsan had been growing impatient.

Kunon, who appeared to be flourishing as a sorcerer at long last, had done

nothing but work for Zeonly since becoming his pupil. He appeared to be devoting himself single-mindedly to his teacher and putting his own needs second. And that perception was correct.

Though he hadn't wanted to think it, Arsan had been concerned that Kunon might shirk magic school in favor of continuing his current lifestyle. That might still be a kind of success, but Arsan hoped that, if Kunon was truly brilliant, he would aim to become a Royal Sorcerer.

And so this was the good news the marquess had been waiting for.

"Well then, we need to put things in order. I've already got the paperwork ready."

As he waited impatiently, Arsan did as he was wont to do—he prepared.

He had been thinking of showing the paperwork to Kunon at some point and recommending that he attend. But if Kunon had already decided to go, it made things a lot easier.

Kunon would need to travel to the magic city of Dirashik by next summer, so they had about half a year to spare. But that kind of time could pass in the blink of an eye. Perhaps it was a good idea to show Kunon the paperwork right away.

"My Lord, there's something else."

"What is it?"

Arsan was eagerly taking out and stacking up the magic school paperwork when Iko spoke again.

"It seems he might be able to make eyes now."

Arsan's hands froze.

"...What? He can?"

Arsan knew why his son had become obsessed with magic.

Two years ago, the marquess had held a faint hope that the issue would be resolved when they met the Royal Sorcerers, but it hadn't been possible. He had tried not to think about it much after that.

"I can't say anything for sure, but Master Zeonly said he thought Kunon could

do it. Master Kunon wants to concentrate on making eyes for a while, so he asked me to leave... Alas, he's growing up and leaving me behind...!"

Arsan chose to ignore Iko's crocodile tears.

"He's all right on his own now?"

"Oh yes, he has been for some time. At present, he struggles with nothing in his daily life."

Arsan and Iko, who had known Kunon before he immersed himself in magic, had long ago decided that he should never be left alone. The possibility of him ending his own life had been too great. That had been a real risk for Kunon back then.

"...You've put up with so much for so long, Iko."

"I've had nothing but fun the past two or three years. Hee-hee, I even started wanting a child of my own."

"Have you found anyone to marry?"

"I haven't."

"Might I introduce you to someone? There's a guard at the castle who I'm thinking of hiring to be our gatekeeper. I'd be more than pleased if the two of you would continue to support the Gurion estate as husband and wife."

"It'll depend on his face, figure, personality, and salary, of course."

Iko was a very ambitious maid.



"...Hmmm."

He'd test, then write down what didn't work.

Then he'd test some more and keep writing down what didn't work.

Kunon was in his room, doggedly repeating the same process over and over, as a stack of papers detailing his failures piled up on the table.

Since he couldn't see to begin with, Kunon didn't need a light source. Whether it was day or night made no difference—he could use magic to run his

experiments and write his notes.

He forgot about the passage of time and lost himself in his work, and when he was tired, he collapsed into the Supersoft-Body A-ori. His regular bed was cold in the winter, so he had fully switched over.

That's how his days went.

He had no contact with the outside world, except for once a day when Iko would bring food and check on him. He only ate when he was hungry, so even meals brought no sense of time.

Abandoning every other part of his daily life, Kunon devoted himself to his goal of creating eyes.

"...So that's no good, either."

Then, all at once, Kunon stopped thinking and threw his pen down on the table.

He had already conducted well over one hundred trials. He had started by testing the most plausible methods and moving toward the more unlikely, but nothing had worked.

"Ouch."

How long had he been sitting in his chair, focused on his notes? His whole body was stiff, and his bones creaked with the slightest movement.

"Come on!"

Kunon slapped both sides of his face at once, trying to reinvigorate himself.

Things had come to a standstill. He was worn-out. He needed a break.

For the first time in a while, Kunon left his room and headed for the main house.

Apparently, it was nighttime.

Kunon pounded on the door of his elder brother's bedroom, and Ixio answered it wearing a nightcap.

"Oh, hey. It's you. I was just about to go to bed..."

Kunon had thought it felt like a winter's night, based on the temperature, and he had been right. But that didn't matter right now.

"Brother, let's go to the sauna."

"What? Now? *Right* now? I have school tomorrow, you know."

At thirteen years old, Ixio was a second-year in the senior school for nobles.

"I need to relax," said Kunon. "Come on."

He made this selfish demand without a hint of guilt. His face looked a little pale, and he wasn't making any of his usual odd jokes. He must be exhausted. If he was saying he needed to relax, it must really be true.

Ixio knew what Kunon was spending his time on lately. It must be considerably difficult. He was probably stuck. Ixio thought his brother must feel the same way he felt when he was tired of studying and reached for a relaxing novel or a practice sword to unwind.

"...Did you invite Father?"

"Huh? Should I have?"

At some point, Kunon had tried making an improvised sauna based on information he'd gleaned from a book. It had gone surprisingly well, and every so often, those of the Gurion estate would indulge. It had started out as nothing more than a magic experiment...but such activities sometimes led to happy coincidences.

"Father likes the sauna more than me. If you don't invite him, I'll have to listen to his complaints... Oh, fine. You go first and prepare the sauna. I'll go get Father. Oh, and be quiet. If Mother finds out, she'll give me an earful."

No matter what happened, it was always the elder son who got in trouble. It wasn't really fair, but Ixio had given up on that point long ago.

More importantly, his younger brother, who rarely turned to his family for help with anything other than pocket money, had come to him. Ixio was willing to accompany him to the sauna as many times as he wanted.

Thus, at an hour when the children should have been sleeping, the three men of the Gurion family sat together in the makeshift sauna, sweating in the hot

steam.

While they were there, they took a dip in the bath.

Ixio just wanted to go to sleep when they were done, but Arsan was looking forward to a nice ale.

It had been about three weeks since Kunon shut himself up in his room.

Refreshed, he returned to the detached house and slept soundly.

“...No good.”

He continued running trials.

He'd seen no positive results, but Kunon had no reason to stop trying, so on he went.

Sometimes, though, he'd suddenly lose his concentration. His mind would refuse to work, and he would want to throw everything aside and go to sleep.

Perhaps this was inevitable, since he was constantly hitting dead ends. He didn't feel like he was making progress, and he'd started to think he was pushing himself too hard.

“Hnnngh!”

Kunon stood up from his chair and stretched his arms high above his head. He was surprised to hear his lower back pop and crack. Apparently, he'd been sitting in the same position for quite a while.

“...I think I'll take a little break.”

This was something Zeonly had taught him: When he was stuck, he needed to distance himself from the problem. You have to take a step back, cool down, and look at the issue from a little further away, he'd said.

If you spend too long staring at one thing, you won't be able to see the forest for the trees. So when you think you've run into something you can't solve, clear your mind and try again.

Naps seemed to work for Zeonly, but Kunon still hadn't settled on any one method in particular.

“I...don't feel like using the sauna...”

As he spoke, Kunon left his room and headed for the main house.

He ended up in the sauna anyway.

He'd run into his mother, Tinalisa, who had heard about the boys' night in the sauna a few days before. Apparently, she had been on the lookout, and when Kunon arrived at the main house in the evening, a servant had caught sight of him and informed her.

"I haven't even gotten to try it yet," his mother had whined, and so Kunon accompanied her and his father, who happened to be home early, to the sauna. Ixio wasn't back from school, so it was just the three of them.

And there was ale, of course. His elegant mother, ever the noblewoman, could drink his father under the table with gallant ease.

"Aaah! Oooh! This is the life!"

Kunon couldn't see it, but Tinalisa was immodestly wrapped in nothing but a towel, one hand on her hip, the other holding a big tankard. She chugged the ale down in huge gulps, looking more manly than anyone. It was as if she was trying to replenish the water she'd sweated out with cold beer.

"Forget wine—this is all I need!"

Kunon had never heard his mother sound so exhilarated. She was positively gleeful. Arsan was beginning to regret handing her the drink.

"I love you, though," he said.

Where the "though" came into play wasn't clear.

It had been about two months since Kunon shut himself up in his room.

He made some water that tasted like pear juice and drank it to rehydrate. Then he returned to the detached house and slept soundly.



"...!"

Crash.

Kunon shot to his feet, sending his chair toppling to the ground. He paid it no

mind.

“This! This is it!”

He couldn't let this sensation slip away. He couldn't forget the trial he'd just run.

Just then, for a moment, he was sure he'd seen something. Not the way he saw colors with magic. This was something clearer, more detailed.

He'd seen many things he recognized from pictures in books.

In his room, where he had only ever seen things as vague colors, he'd been bombarded with a slew of information all at once. Similarly colored items—which seemed to blend together as one when viewed with magic—were suddenly discernible as individual things.

He saw the large bookshelf that took up one whole wall and the variously colored spines of the books that filled it. He saw the pile of books and documents on the floor in front of the shelf. Part of the pile had collapsed, leaving the floor littered with sheets of paper. There was no one to tidy up since he'd sent Iko away, so the mess had stayed as it was.

Hanging on the wall next to the mostly empty closet was the formal outfit and bow tie Kunon had worn to school and again on his trip to the palace. It was already too small for him. He hadn't realized it was hanging there.

In that brief moment, that was what he'd seen.

That amount of information alone overwhelmed him.

So this is what it is to see! Not just a substitute like seeing with magic! This! This is it!

He couldn't allow himself to forget such a thing.

The way he felt just now—he couldn't lose that sensation.

Kunon's hands moved with inhuman swiftness as he tried to sort out what had suddenly appeared in his mind. He needed to record this trial with absolute accuracy. But his fingers trembled. His body shook. As the realization that he'd achieved his goal caught up with him, joy threatened to erupt in his chest.

Finally, he had a handhold.

After months of fumbling, a long-awaited beacon of light shone in the darkness.

This was the kind of problem that—if he could only get a foot in the door—everything would rapidly progress.

He wrote while turning the situation over in his mind, so that he wouldn't miss a thing. Though his body shook with emotion, he tried not to let his pen waver.

He decided to write a second copy of his notes, just to be safe. It would act as insurance in case he spilled a beverage or some ink over the paper. Kunon couldn't afford to lose these writings for any reason, even a careless mistake he normally wouldn't think twice about.

His thoughts were racing.

The doorway to possibility was finally opening to him, letting a sliver of light come through. That brilliance was finally shining on his face.

But for now—

Now that he had it—

When he was done with his notes, Kunon decided to stop there and get some proper rest. He wanted to be in fighting form to take on what came next.

Just as he was wondering how he'd ever get to sleep when he was so worked up, he passed out. His heart and mind were roiling, but his body was exhausted.

It had been about three and a half months since Kunon shut himself up in his room.

The core was a water mirror—a thin sheet of liquid that could reflect the surrounding scenery.

Kunon then applied a rheologic sand pattern over the surface. The flowing design scanned the shifting landscape and sent the information to Kunon's consciousness.

The mirror was enclosed in a transparent water bubble to protect it.

That was the entire device. It was about as big as an eyeball.

The mechanism was wonderfully simple. He had jumped through endless hoops, testing out difficult techniques and complex applied methods, but now he realized he'd been overdoing it.

He didn't need a complicated framework.

He didn't need a relay mechanism, either.

All Kunon had to do was connect the water mirror and his magic power directly to his consciousness. This, too, was wonderfully simple.

Once he knew what to do, it was almost disappointingly easy to accomplish. After he'd seized upon the critical clue, he conducted even more trials and made repeated adjustments.

And then it was complete.

"I can see... Th-this is...my surroundings...vision... *Agh?!'*"

Kunon struggled to find the words, overcome with feeling.

Then a fierce headache dropped him to his knees.

The visual information was overwhelming. His brain fought to keep up, rejecting any further input. It seemed even his own room was too much. Kunon couldn't imagine how he would endure the even more complicated view outside.

"...I did it... I did it!"

But that worry was temporary. He simply wasn't used to seeing yet. If he acclimated himself to it gradually, he should be fine.

His dream was coming true. He'd succeeded in gaining his sight through magic.

Tears of joy streamed down his face, and he fell asleep just like that, utterly spent. The floor was a little cold, but he slept soundly. The feeling of accomplishment was a greater comfort than any bed.

Winter had long since passed. It was spring.

In the end, an A-ori was the foundation.

It was a forty-section compound... After forty alterations to the base spell, finally, Kunon's wish came true.

Although the structure itself was simple, its composition was very delicately balanced.

He was able to get this far because of three things: what Jenié had taught him about strangely specific ways to use magic; what he had learned from Zeonly about the basic structure of every magic tool; and Kunon's own skill—straightforward, honest hard work.

Kunon had eyes of his own, so the device couldn't be put directly in his head.

Instead, his eye made of magic—the Glass Eye, as he called it—floated around in the air just like an A-ori. And it stayed in the air. Or at least, Kunon hoped to maintain it there.

Kunon fell asleep crying. Then he woke, checked to make sure it still worked properly, and cried some more.

Since he was already playing the hermit, he spent another week or so getting acclimated to the Glass Eye and bursting into tears every other second.

He needed practice. If the slightest glimpse left him with a pounding headache, he wouldn't be able to use it at all outside. The amount of visual stimuli in his room paled in comparison to the outdoors. What if his brain burst into flames the moment he looked at it?

Kunon felt the risk was considerable, but he had no intention of scrapping the device he had worked so hard to complete.

He tried various things, such as purposefully obscuring the view so that it wasn't as clear, making it look dimmer so that he couldn't see as many things, and adjusting the visual scope to a small range.

He went through trial after trial, crying the entire time.

To be honest, Kunon occasionally thought it odd that he was crying so much, but as he thoroughly investigated the Glass Eye, the tears kept flowing.

It was during those days, when he felt he had wept enough for a lifetime, that he achieved one of his objectives.

“...Hmm.”

Tired from crying, Kunon had fallen asleep, then woke up relieved to discover that, for the time being, he was able to produce satisfactory results.

He could maintain use of the Eye for a while at a short distance. When he moved farther away, the image blurred. The farther away he was, the less he could see, to the point where everything reduced to vague colors. At that point, it was probably preferable to use his old method of perceiving with magic. But this limitation was likely only temporary.

Kunon restricted the range of his Eye so that he couldn't even see from one end of his room to the other. He doubted such a constraint would interfere with his daily life.

If he limited his view to this extent, surely he could use the Glass Eye outside.

He had achieved minimum visual ability. In the future, he wanted to see more, but this was enough for now.

It was time.

Having made up his mind, Kunon washed his puffy, tear-stained cheeks, put a towel warmed with hot water over his face and dozed for a little while. He ate his favorite fried-egg-and-bacon sandwich for breakfast and savored a cup of black tea.

When his body and mind were both satisfied, he stood up.

“...This is a little scary,” he muttered.

As he spoke, he created a full-length water mirror on the wall.

At some point, Kunon had decided that if he ever gained his sight, the first person he would look at would be himself.

He used to be full of self-loathing. He couldn't do anything by himself, nothing went the way he wanted, and all he did was make the people around him worry. He fell all the time, and the only thing he felt was pain. Kunon had hated himself back then.

Once he immersed himself in magic, he merely stopped thinking about such things. When he became able to see colors with magic, he found fewer and

fewer things to hate about himself, but that was all.

Even now, he didn't particularly like himself.

Kunon wanted to see the face of the person he hated most in the world, even if it was just once. He hadn't put any thought into it beyond that.

There was no point in seeing his own face. He knew that well enough. But he had come to a major milestone in his own life. He might finally start liking himself, or he might grow to hate himself more than ever.

Once, he had come across a portrait of Orx, Hughlia's most famous stage performer. If he resembled a man as good-looking and elegant as that, he could probably learn to love himself.

He hoped he'd be the kind of man who looked good with a beard. Kunon didn't have any facial hair yet, since he was still a child, but he had plans to grow a magnificent beard someday.

On the other hand, he would hate it if he looked weak. He wanted to be cool and refined. A face unsuited to a beard would be the worst.

That said, he wasn't expecting much. Kunon couldn't imagine the person he hated most in the world having an impressive face.

"Here we go."

As these thoughts wandered through his head, Kunon stood in front of the big water mirror and made up his mind.

He was going to look.

It was time.

Kunon activated the Glass Eye.

A water sphere popped into existence next to him. He adjusted it, looked at the mirror, and— ".....Is this...me?"

He had brown hair so light it was nearly blond and a plain face. He looked so much like the childhood portraits of his Gurion ancestors that it didn't even feel like he was seeing himself for the first time.

His unfocused eyes were silver, and looking at them left him with an

indescribable feeling.

“Hmm...”

He didn't look cool. He didn't think a beard would suit him, either, though maybe that was because he was still a child.

Surely he would grow up to be an attractive man who looked great with a beard. He hoped so anyway.

“.....”

Kunon stared at himself.

So this is my face.

It made sense to him in some ways, but it felt like the face of a stranger. He didn't know what to think about his own reflection.

“...Hmm.”

Kunon had now seen the thing he wanted most to see, but it didn't mean anything to him.

What was the point of seeing himself?

He had thought it would inspire a big change in his attitude or values, or perhaps the world would look or feel different to him.

But that wasn't the case.

Kunon remained Kunon, and his values stayed pretty much the same.

So this is it, he thought.

He was disappointed.

He'd spent so long burning with anticipation, trying so hard, and now he was finally able to see his own despised features. But just gazing at them, nothing in particular resonated with him. He wasn't happy, or sad, or filled with loathing.

It briefly occurred to him that perhaps, if people faced their biggest problems and anxieties head-on like this, those issues, too, might end up seeming insignificant.

“Hey.”



Kunon called out to the giant crab—so big he had to look up at it—that was *standing behind him*.

“Do you think I’ll ever be able to like myself?”

The crab said nothing. It didn’t react.

“...And by the way, what are you?”

The crab had no answer for that, either.

Kunon went outside.

In the garden of the detached house, he timidly activated the Glass Eye, seeing the world beyond his room for the first time.

“Whoa.”

Above him, the purple sky unfurled endlessly. The grass under his feet was pure white. The trees were blue, and the sun was a big black mark in the sky.

“...So this is the world, huh?”

Somewhere deep down, he knew.

He knew that what he was seeing wasn’t the same as what he’d seen in pictures and encyclopedias.

Kunon had studied many reference materials, and this color scheme was wildly different from what they’d described. He knew the color of the grass from his magic vision, and in the many pictures of the sky he had come across, it was generally blue or red or dark. There was no purple. And the sun wasn’t a black dot... Come to think of it, the sun should have been far away, but he could see it surprisingly well, even though he had adjusted the Glass Eye’s range so that he could view only a small area.

Something was very wrong.

Was it his knowledge? The world?

Or was it his way of seeing that was wrong?

“Master Kunon!”

Iko, who had apparently been nearby, rushed over when she saw Kunon

emerge from his room for the first time in a while.

“Iko... Iko?”

It was his first time seeing someone else’s face.

She looked loving. Not unlike the image Kunon had in his mind of her. Her dark-brown hair was tied back in a big braid. Her expression was fresh and bright, like her personality.

“...Master Kunon?”

A nearby A-ori flashed as it reflected the light. It was suspended in the air as if peering into Iko’s face.

Seeing the water sphere’s odd movement, Iko made a guess.

“Could it be? You can see?” she asked.

“Yeah. I can see, Iko.”

“Oh, Master Kunon!”

Iko wrapped the boy up in a hug, sending the Glass Eye hovering before her flying.

“You did it! You really did it! You finally made your wish come true!”

The two of them had known each other a long time, and their feelings and attachment ran deep. Iko no longer thought of Kunon as the son of her employer. And to Kunon, Iko wasn’t just a servant.

He was happy to see her pleased. This was considerably more enjoyable than looking at his boring reflection.

At the moment, though—

Kunon leaned shakily against his maid. When she’d sent the Glass Eye flying, his vision had suddenly spun round and round. Still not used to the outside scenery, the abrupt shift in his view was hard to bear. He felt extremely dizzy.

“Thank you, Iko.”

They hugged for a while, savoring their joy, then stepped apart.

Once more, Kunon looked at her closely. She was smiling.

She was smiling, but...

“Iko, I want to ask you something.”

“Of course. By the way, I’m still on the lookout for a boyfriend, but I already have a matchmaking interview set up!”

“Oh, I see... So, Iko, do you have a horn growing on your head, by any chance?”

“No. I look like a devil when I’m angry, but my horns aren’t out at the moment.”

“...I see.”

So Iko didn’t have a horn. And yet Kunon could see it—a single impressive horn growing right above her forehead.

He’d almost replied to her earlier with “Now I can see your charming face and your sexy horn.” It seems he’d been right to hold his tongue.

“...No horn, huh? Hmm.”

Kunon was able to see, but...

“Incidentally, is there something behind me?”

“No... Oh no, are you trying to spook me right now? I love scary stories!”

It seemed she couldn’t see the giant crab. But it was still there behind Kunon, looking down at him.

That was when Kunon realized something.

Somehow, he was seeing things he shouldn’t be able to see.

Kunon was seeing things he shouldn’t.

What on earth was going on?

Because of this new anxiety, he was no longer able to truly enjoy his accomplishment.

After their hug and some rejoicing, Iko practically dragged Kunon to the main house to see his mother, Tinalisa.

When she heard the news, his mother started to cry. She held Kunon, tears in

her eyes. She was so happy for him.

Over and over, she told him, “I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to bring you into this world properly.”

She had probably wanted to say those words for a long time but was never able to. Now it was like a dam had broken.

By all rights, Kunon should have been crying and hugging her back.

And yet...

His mother’s right eye shone with a gold glow, and her left was jet-black. If it hadn’t been for her unexpectedly impressive appearance, Kunon probably would have been sobbing along with her.

He had a hunch that other people, too, would have features he shouldn’t be seeing, like the crab following him and Iko’s horn. Being able to see had become its own source of anxiety before he even got a look at his family.

At this point, he wasn’t even sure what his mother was *supposed* to look like. Having different-colored eyes made her seem like the protagonist of some fantasy novel—a work of fiction.

No, wait.

If he looked closely and concentrated, Kunon could see through *the things he shouldn’t be seeing*.

It was the same with the crab. When he looked hard, he could see past it, so it had to be insubstantial. He couldn’t touch it, either, and it never responded to his words or actions. It was just there, behind him, following him around like a specter.

When he slept, the crab simply stood nearby.

It could pass through objects, walls, and doors. Depending on the size of the room, part of the crab’s body would sometimes be outside of it.

Kunon was surprised by it at first, but in the week since its appearance, when he started testing the Glass Eye, he had already become indifferent to its presence. He was now used to it being there.

He could probably see his mother's true face and eye color if he stared hard enough. However, concentrating that much wore him out and made his head hurt, so he decided to just accept her cool appearance for the time being.

"...Are you descended from a hero, Mother?"

"Hmm?"

No matter how he looked at it, her face was extremely cool. Even from up close. She was so impressive that it made him wonder if his own plain features were some kind of mistake.

Later, Kunon asked Iko about his mother's eyes, and she told him they were both a stunning green.

Apparently, her true form was a little less like that of a fantasy protagonist.

When Ixio returned from the senior school for nobles, Kunon told him he could see.

"Really?!"

His brother was cool-looking, too. He had huge, lustrous black wings growing out of his back.

Ixio was fourteen now. He was large for his age and ate a lot, so he didn't look much like a child anymore. He had the same color hair as Kunon, though not the same eye color. His hair was cut short and gave a very different impression from Kunon's.

And of course, there were the wings.

"...Brother, are your parents angels or demons? Or maybe fallen angels?"

"They're your parents, too, so you should know."

Kunon knew. But lately, he had started to doubt whether he was even human in the first place.

Later, he asked Iko if his elder brother had wings on his back. She started talking about irrelevant things in response ("Humans are born with wings—the wings of freedom and possibility. But as they get older..."), so it seemed the answer was no.

Apparently, Ixio's true form was not that of a fallen angel with jet-black wings.

When his father came home, Kunon told him he could see.

"You did it? At last! Well done, Kunon!"

Kunon could feel that Arsan was as pleased as if it were his own accomplishment. But there was something more pressing at the moment.

Kunon had wondered if his father would also have an impressive appearance, but perhaps that would've been too good to be true. It would have made sense. His mother and brother were so cool-looking, after all.

But as for his father...

His father...was blurry.

Arsan's whole body, from head to toe, looked like it was wrapped in fog. Everything surrounding him was crystal clear, making it all the more obvious that his father alone was oddly indistinct.

"...What's wrong?"

Kunon seemed subdued, and the Glass Eye had drawn so close to Arsan that he could have reached out and touched it.

Arsan had been told what the device was, so he knew his son was looking intently at him. He just didn't know the reason.

Why was Kunon staring at him?

Arsan could never have imagined, even in his wildest dreams, that he looked blurry and vague to his son.

"Father..... No, it's nothing."

His father was so blurry. How could he describe it?

Unsure of what to say, Kunon's reply ended up as vague as his father's image.

Later, when he asked Iko whether his father was good-looking, she told him, "He looks like you, young master." Kunon was crestfallen.

If they looked alike, Kunon thought his father must be a plain, unremarkable middle-aged man.

He was scared to find out whether Arsan looked good with a beard, so he didn't ask.

At present, Kunon had only seen four other people: his family and Iko.

If he put any more strain on his mind, he'd suffer severe headaches. If he wanted to look at anything else, he needed to give his brain a break.

That evening, the Gurion family had dinner together for the first time in ages.

Everyone celebrated the realization of Kunon's dream: his blurry father, his mother with her different-colored eyes, and his winged elder brother. They all joined Kunon and the giant crab that stood behind him.

It must have looked like a group of fantastic, terrifying creatures feasting together.

But the only one who knew that was Kunon.

It was out of the frying pan and into the fire for the young sorcerer.

He'd finally obtained his sight, but he couldn't enjoy it in earnest.

In situations such as this, it was best to consult a mentor. His teacher might have an idea of what was going on, but even if he didn't, that was fine.

Kunon wanted to tell someone about what he could see. He wanted to hear other opinions. More than anything, he simply needed to get the truth off his chest.

After dinner, he returned to the detached house and grabbed a pen.

Kunon was going to write a letter to Zeonly. It had been about four months since they last saw each other.



Chapter 8

Twelfth Birthday

“We don’t have as much time as I thought.”

“That’s true. We’re cutting it pretty close.”

Kunon and Iko were preparing for his trip. He had sorted through everything in the detached house with the intention of finally vacating it and had just finished packing up the bare necessities for his journey. Everything he wasn’t taking with him would be moved to his old room in the main house—all books and documents having to do with magic.

A few days ago, Kunon had achieved his goal...more or less. He was seeing things that were a bit abnormal, but he had successfully made an eye with magic and obtained his vision.

Spring was coming to an end, and it was almost Kunon’s birthday. He would be turning twelve.

He was going to spend that day with his family, and then—with that chapter of his life closed—he would leave the Kingdom of Hughlia soon after, bound for magic school.

“You can get any odds and ends you need there, so I suppose this is it for

preparations.”

“Yeah.”

Kunon didn’t have much luggage. Just about the only things he absolutely had to pack were his pajamas and his underwear.

“At magic school, students usually stay in dorms, right?” asked Iko.

“Well, the thing is—”

That was generally the case, but Kunon hadn’t known if he would attend until quite late. Because of that, the deadline for applying to live in the dorms had passed.

He would have to discuss it with someone once he arrived. If there was an open room, he would stay in the dorm. If not, he would look for other accommodations.

Kunon had money, so he knew things would work out.

“My living situation hasn’t been settled yet. I’ll have to find something once I’m there.”

“That sounds difficult.”

“Doesn’t it? It’d sure be nice to have a reliable maid with me. What do you think? Iko?”

“My apologies, Master Kunon.”

Right.

The maid Kunon relied upon most wouldn’t be accompanying him to magic school.

It was common for royalty or nobility to train as sorcerers, so the dorms allowed students to bring along a servant or two. Kunon’s father intended to appoint a servant to accompany his son—but Iko, the one Kunon wanted at his side more than anyone, had declined the offer.

“I’m sorry,” Iko apologized again. “I want to get married. I’m already a little old for marriage, so it’s now or never. If I give up at this moment, I might as well give up forever.”

There was no way Kunon could demand she come with him when she put it like that. He could only ask half-jokingly.

The reason Iko had put off getting married for so long was because she had been staying with Kunon. She didn't say so herself, but he knew.

Ever since he was little, she had been there. She had always been with him, even when Kunon didn't realize it.

He was so grateful for her devotion. And that was all the more reason why he couldn't ask her to give up her own life for his any longer.

...Or at least, he knew all that in his head. But it was hard to suppress his feelings on the matter.

"Do you really think I can live without you, Iko?"

"Would you marry me, then, Master Kunon? Would you? Let me tell you, infidelity and mistresses are deal-breakers for me. Are you going to end things with Princess Mirika to be with me?"

"I can't in this life, but I could reserve the next one for you."

"That's too bad. I'm the type who only cares about the present. If I'm happy now, I don't care about tomorrow or the next life."

Iko was a maid who lived in the moment.

Around that time, the Gurion household was in a bit of a frenzy.

With Kunon about to attend magic school, everyone was preparing for his departure. There were procedures and formalities to complete, and itineraries to compile.

Kunon needed to know at least a little bit about his destination, like which foods there were most delicious, so there was a lot of research to do.

Unexpectedly, Kunon was also contacted by Ouro Tauro, his elder brother's swordplay instructor. He sent Kunon an invitation to visit him, saying, "If you're going to be away for a while, why not spend a little time before you go learning the basics of swordplay in earnest?"

For the last few months, Kunon had been absorbed in making his Glass Eye.

During that time, he had only practiced his basic forms and swinging—things that used to be part of his daily routine—when he needed a change of pace. As a result, he'd lost a lot of his physical conditioning.

Realizing this, Kunon decided to spend a night in Master Ouro's care in order to shore up his stamina for the journey.

He ended up trapped there for a week.

Unable to leave, he was practically forced to undergo ridiculously rigorous training. He was starting to lose all trust in the older man.

He also began to distrust his father, who had agreed to the whole thing without Kunon's knowledge.

Arsan wanted to send Kunon off just a little bit stronger, since he didn't know what would happen on his journey. It was done out of love. Kunon knew his father had his best interests at heart, but his faith in the man was shaken.

It was worth it in the end, however, when he felt his lost strength mostly restored.

And when Kunon's swordplay training was over, and he'd returned to the Gurion estate, some news arrived as though it had been waiting for him.

It was from Mirika.

The next day, she would come for a visit, and she would bring Zeonly with her.

"Kunon!"

It had been about four months since he had heard Mirika's voice—and just as long since he'd listened to her adorable footsteps, never running but walking toward him as fast as possible.

"Your Highness!"

They had never gone so long without seeing each other. Kunon had missed her. He felt like he was going to cry. But he held back his tears.

"...Of course."

Kunon had anticipated this. He'd thought it wouldn't be a problem.

He might have expected it, but the discomfort it caused him was too much. His longing to see Mirika dispersed in the face of his unease.

A single feather, as tall as the princess herself, was growing out of her head.

The moment he saw her, he had one thought.

Oh, she's got a huge quill stuck in her head.

...The shock of it even overshadowed Mirika's girlish beauty. She had beautiful blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Kunon was finally seeing her.

So this is what she looks like.

And yet all that emotion was being forced aside. The only way Kunon could think of Mirika at the moment was as "a girl with a quill stuck in her head."

"Kunon?"

"I missed you, Princess. Is your head all right?"

"Yes, I missed you, too... My head?"

There wasn't actually a quill stabbing into her head. She was obviously fine, but Kunon couldn't stop himself from asking.

"It's been a while, Master Kunon."

Behind Mirika stood Dario Sanz, knight of the Third Order.

Over the past two years, until recently, the ever-reserved knight had been a frequent visitor to the Gurion estate, acting as both observer and guard.

"Hello, Sir Dario."

They may have met only once a week, but over time, they had become quite friendly.

On his back, there was a huge white longsword. This was, of course, one of the things that only Kunon could see.

It was very impressive.

And then—

"Yo, Kunon. You've got some nerve calling me all the way out here."

Strolling over at his leisure was Zeonly Finroll—Kunon’s teacher and a great Royal Sorcerer whom Kunon trusted completely in all things related to magic.

He was... Yes, he was...

“Radiant...!”



Zeonly's entire body was wrapped in a brilliant light, so bright that Kunon couldn't even see him.

It was opulent—magnificent—golden.

If this was what it meant to shine with confidence, it certainly fit Zeonly's personality.

But depending on how one looked at it, this was worse than being blurry from head to toe like how Arsan appeared. The light was so intense that it was impossible to see the man himself. He was nothing but a human-shaped glow.

"Huh? Radiant? Well, obviously. I light up the room wherever I go. Everybody knows that. It goes without saying."

"That's not what I meant."

Kunon thought this might be a little difficult to explain.

Zeonly was probably talking about the sort of radiance that was in the mind of the viewer—something that came from their feelings.

Kunon's issue, however, was with the person being viewed... Though, perhaps this was also a problem with the viewer, in a way.

As much as Kunon didn't want to, he had to cut his reunion with Quill-Head Mirika short. It had been a while, and he wanted to take his time catching up with her, but that would have to wait.

He excused himself and went into the detached house with Zeonly, the Man-Shaped Light.

Kunon cut right to the chase.

In their two years together as teacher and pupil, they had fought and reconciled over and over. They had shared countless successes and failures. There was no need to keep secrets from each other.

Zeonly accepted Kunon, and Kunon returned the favor. Zeonly didn't show his weaknesses easily, but Kunon was prepared to support him when the time came.

Kunon explained the situation. He told his teacher about successfully

obtaining his sight with the Glass Eye. He explained that he couldn't use it for long periods of time, but he was slowly growing accustomed to it. He talked about seeing his own face, his family members' faces, and the world around him. And finally, Kunon told Zeonly about being able to see things he wasn't supposed to.

"What do you mean, things you 'shouldn't be seeing'?"

Zeonly's question was only natural, and Kunon answered him.

"To me, you appear so bright that I can't look directly at you."

"Well, duh. I'm always glowing. I chalk it up to my captivatingly good looks, unshakable confidence, and unmatched talent. There's nobody on this earth who shines as brilliantly as me."

"That's not what I mean. How do I put this? You're blinding."

"Oh? Blinding, is it? Well, yeah. Like I said, I'm dazzling. Don't keep pointing out the obvious. How long have we known each other?"

"No, that's not what I'm trying to say."

Zeonly's unwavering self-confidence was proving quite the obstacle, so Kunon decided to try explaining things in a different way.

"I can see things that can't be seen. To me, it looks like you're giving off light."

"You really don't have to keep saying it, and I don't appreciate repeating myself. Obviously, I shine."

"There's a crab behind me. A big one."

"...What? A crab?"

"Sir Dario doesn't carry a longsword, does he? Well, there was a beautiful white longsword on his back. My maid looks like she has an incredible horn sprouting from her head."

"...Are you being serious?"

"I joke around, and I lie, but I wouldn't tell a joke or a lie that would seriously anger you, Master."

"You have, though. And quite often... Well, I'll put that aside for now." Zeonly

crossed his arms. “So about you seeing things... What’s this all about?”

“That’s why I asked you to come—so I could get your advice.”

“...I see. Makes sense. By the way, can you see anything on Princess Mirika?”

“...I don’t really want to say. But if you’re asking, I’ll tell you. Though you might regret hearing it.”

“Tell me. There’s still a lot we don’t understand, so it’s better to have a bigger sample size.”

When he put it like that, Kunon had to tell him. He explained that it looked like Mirika had a massive quill sticking out of her head.

Zeonly burst into laughter.

“I have no idea what that means, but it’s so funny! Hilarious—a quill sticking out of her head!”

Zeonly was practically howling. Kunon waited until his master calmed back down.

“It’s not a laughing matter, you know,” he said.

After knowing her for nearly five years, Kunon was finally able to see his fiancée’s face via the Glass Eye. And yet the quill in her head was leaving a stronger impression than all the memories of their previous time together. It was so bad that he couldn’t even remember what her face looked like, though he had a clear image of the quill in her head.

Like he’d done with the crab standing behind him, Kunon thought he would get used to the quill after a while. But that would only cause new problems.

Now and then, he would casually look up at her and calmly think:

There’s a quill stuck in Mirika’s head.

It’s there as we speak.

I wonder if it will still be there at the wedding.

Maybe someday he’d be gazing at her, thinking something similar, and start laughing. His only worry was whether that laughter would hurt Mirika, since he was sure to find it more absurd and thus funnier in the most serious moments.

“So as far as seeing things goes, I look like I’m glowing?”

“Yes. You’re like a person made of light. So bright—in the most literal sense—that I can’t look directly at you.”

“I see. I may shine, but I wouldn’t say I rival the sun or anything. And even if I did—”

To Kunon, the sun looked like a black dot, so it didn’t shine, but whatever.

“—I’m humble, so I would let the sun have the top spot. But I’m definitely the brightest human.”

Zeonly had started to talk nonsense, so Kunon decided to move the conversation along.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“I can think of two possibilities, and they’re totally different.”

Two.

Two ideas.

As expected of a Royal Sorcerer. Zeonly might sprinkle self-praise into every conversation, but it was true he had an outstanding wealth of knowledge.

“The first possibility is that you’re seeing the shape of people’s souls. It’d be like seeing spirits. I don’t know much about that kind of stuff, but I’ve heard of it, so I think you’ll find tons of examples if you do a little research.”

The shape of people’s souls.

Incorporeal manifestations.

“By that theory, my soul looks like a crab, yes? And it’s a little ways apart from my body. Does that mean my soul is crab-shaped and uncontained?”

“I mean, I’m glowing, right? No one can deny that it makes sense that I would shine inside, outside, and in my soul.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

Given that Zeonly truly did appear to be glowing, Kunon couldn’t very well disagree. And it wasn’t particularly upsetting or inconvenient for Kunon to have

a teacher who radiated light. He just had to try not to look at him too much.

“What about the other possibility?” he asked.

“You should be aware of it already— Oh, but I guess you’ve never experienced it. It could also be hallucinations caused by magic sickness.”

When Kunon heard this, he remembered. He *had* heard about something like that before.

“You mean how if someone goes to a place that naturally accumulates magic, they get drunk on it...right?”

“Yeah. I’ve experienced it, too. It feels like I’m drunk on alcohol, and I eventually pass out. But in between getting drunk and passing out, I can see things that aren’t really there. Those are hallucinations induced by magic sickness. Though usually once I wake up again, I don’t remember much.”

Kunon had never overindulged in alcohol, so he couldn’t imagine what it was like. But if Zeonly said so, then such a thing must be possible.

“This is all incredibly interesting, though. I bet the Royal Sorcerers will want to examine you. There must be some kind of logic to how it works.”

“I’m curious, too. But I don’t think I can visit the Black Tower.”

“Probably not. You’re leaving soon, right? It’ll have to wait till you come home. Not that I mind having something to look forward to.”

Kunon was interested as well, but...as the person having the visions, he was frankly a bit bewildered. It wasn’t very fun for *him*.

“Kunon. I’ll be serious for a second.”

“Yes?”

“I really think these strange visions you’re having are fascinating—as a sorcerer, not because it’s some funny joke to me.”

“...I understand.”

“But this is good, isn’t it? You can see things you couldn’t before. Yeah, you’re seeing some stuff that’s a little weird. But that’s it, right? It’s great that you can see at all. So what if you see things a little different?”

“You think so?”

“Don’t overthink it. In nature, there are creatures that can’t see color, and others with lots of eyes. There are even ones that can’t see anything, like you. I mean, even I might see things differently than someone else. Plus, humans divide stuff up into what they want to see and what they don’t based on their emotions. You’re seeing things in a different way, but that’s natural. It’s good that you have your own way of perceiving the world. Everybody does, so don’t let it bother you.”

But Kunon couldn’t help being anxious, no matter what Zeonly said. And it was especially hard to feel convinced when the speaker was this glowing man, the one who looked the strangest of all.

But talking to someone about the situation did make him feel a little better.

He wasn’t sure how credible the two leads were, but at least Kunon had them to follow for the time being. Zeonly truly was a dependable teacher.

It might be a good idea to pay more thorough attention to what he was seeing with the Glass Eye.

“Thank you, Master. I feel a bit less anxious.”

“That’s good. This is just a hunch, but it could be that the things you’re seeing have a deeper meaning. That’s just a guess, of course, so maybe not. Try not to give up on this. If it becomes too difficult, it’s fine to seal it up. But if you can, keep using the Eye. It may come in handy someday.”

Honestly, Kunon still wasn’t used to any of it—seeing the things he wasn’t supposed to see and even sight itself.

Currently, the situation seemed pretty serious to him. But sooner or later, he would probably become acclimated, in every sense of the word.

...So for the time being, Kunon decided he would wait and see what happened.

After finishing up their conversation, Kunon and Zeonly headed back outside.

Mirika was probably waiting at the table in the garden. Dario would be keeping his distance, as usual. Over the two years he’d been visiting, he’d never

once joined the others. He was such a serious person.

“Oh man. You know what?” said Zeonly.

“What is it?”

“I’m probably going to laugh when I see the princess. I’ll start thinking, ‘Oh, she’s got a quill sticking out of her head,’ you know?”

To be frank, it was harder on Kunon, since he could actually see it. He had yet to tell Mirika and Dario that he had gained his vision. He had informed Zeonly by letter, but Kunon was going to tell the other two—specifically Mirika—next.

Mirika would definitely have questions for him.

“What do I look like?”

“What do you think when you look at me?”

“Do I look the way you imagined I would?”

Having a quill stuck in your head must be a new fashion. It looks great! I bet it’s going to become all the rage in Hughlia. You look amazing, just the way I imagined!

...As if he could say any of that.

Kunon had gained his sight.

His range of vision had to be narrowed, and he could only use it for a short duration, but nevertheless, he could see.

Mirika was overjoyed when he told her, and Kunon was truly glad to see how happy she was at the news.

...If it hadn’t been for the quill in her head, they could have rejoiced together without any worry or confusion.

As anticipated, Mirika innocently asked Kunon what she looked like and what he thought of her.

Kunon avoided disaster by replying, “You look like the feather of a beautiful bird. So big and pretty!”

Like the feather of a beautiful bird.

It was the first time Mirika had ever heard such a description, but she was well aware of Kunon's eccentricities, so she concluded it was the kind of thing to be expected from him and accepted it without question.

The Glowing Man, sitting at the same table and listening in, was laughing. He must have picked up on the hesitation and bemusement behind Kunon's words.

It was decided that Zeonly would make a secret report to the government about Kunon obtaining his sight.

Even with the issue of seeing things he shouldn't, it was still a major breakthrough and an incredible invention. Perhaps only a few people would need it, but for them, it would be a ray of hope. And what if it could be used by people other than sorcerers?

From the moment he heard about it, Zeonly had been thinking about reproducing his pupil's invention as a magic tool—something that even ordinary people without magic could operate.

He didn't know whether he would succeed, but so far, Zeonly had given form to just about every idea he'd dreamed up. At some point, his efforts would bear fruit.

Kunon, about to leave the Kingdom of Hughlia for magic school, had decided to spend the next few years experimenting with and testing out the Glass Eye. Accordingly, he and Zeonly decided not to go public with it quite yet.

Kunon still couldn't operate it freely, and the burden it placed on its user was too heavy for everyday use.

And above all, it allowed one to *see too much*.

So long as Kunon had no definitive answers about the things only he was seeing, it seemed too risky to start telling everyone about it. He had consulted with Zeonly on that point, and they'd agreed to keep the Eye's existence a total secret.

Zeonly would just report that Kunon had gained his sight through magic, and even that information would be shared only with a portion of the country's top leadership, such as His Majesty the King and the Grand Master of the Royal Sorcerers.

And so, having saddled his teacher with the burden of reporting all this, Kunon prepared to celebrate his birthday.

On Kunon's twelfth birthday, even Mirika was present. Every year she sent him a letter and a gift, but this was her first time attending in person.

The young sorcerer spent the day with his family and his fiancée. They shared a slightly lavish dinner as a group but otherwise did nothing particularly special.

It wasn't much different from previous birthdays in terms of activities, but it was a special day for Kunon simply because he got to spend it with Mirika. Having a quill stuck in her head didn't change the fact that she was important to him.

There were presents, too.

His blurry father gave him a specially crafted metal cane. It was solid and a bit heavy, but it could double as a weapon if necessary. It was, quite literally, a gift to support him wherever he went.

From his mother, with her hero-like mismatched eyes, he received a pen made of expensive, high-quality materials. Having seen how Zeonly forced her son to do paperwork, she thought he would probably have many more opportunities to write in the future. She had chosen a design that was ergonomic and simple to use.

His elder brother, the fallen angel, gave Kunon a gourmet's map of the world that he had researched and compiled himself.

Traveling was often difficult and tiring. It wasn't uncommon for someone to feel physically unwell while on a trip. But apparently, if there was even one thing to look forward to, such journeys could be completely different.

The map was a little untidy, but the thickness of the string-bound sheaf of paper was proof enough of how much effort Ixio had put into his gift for Kunon. As the next marquess of the Gurion estate, Ixio was already very busy. Kunon felt grateful that his brother had spared so much time for him.

And from Mirika, Kunon received a magic silver bracelet. It was one of a set, and the other was in Mirika's possession. Every time Kunon touched the bracelet on his wrist, a memory of Mirika would well up in his mind. He was

certain to quickly grow fond of the accessory.

All the gifts he received from Mirika and his family were given with the knowledge that he would be away for a while.

And so Kunon's twelfth birthday passed without incident.



Epilogue

It was the day after Kunon's birthday.

Members of the Gurion family and their household servants started gathering at the front gate early in the morning.

Kunon would soon leave for magic school, and everyone was there to see him off.

"Well, bye for now!" Kunon called out.

Then he climbed into the waiting carriage. His tone was casual, as if he was only popping out for a quick errand.

A clamor rose from those gathered around. "Huh? What?"

It was a bit anticlimactic for his parents and brother, who had expected something a bit more emotional, like some moving words of farewell. But, they thought, this was just like Kunon. He was no longer the type for gloomy or serious good-byes.

"I'm off! Bye-bye!"

Iko, who was accompanying Kunon for part of the journey, followed him into the coach with her own casual good-bye.

It was all thanks to her. For better or worse, Kunon had changed because of Iko.

...No, it was certainly a change for the better. Or at least, the good canceled out the bad. Probably.

Kunon looked out the window at his family. They were watching him in silence, too amazed at his conduct to speak.

"I'm off! I'll be back in two...three...four...? Maybe five... Anyway, I'll be back in a few years!"

Kunon Gurion was twelve years old.

He smiled as he spoke. There was no trace of his old sorrow to be found.

The carriage started to move.

It didn't shake much, since there were flexible A-ori covering the wheels. The ride was quite smooth.

"Would you like to eat lunch, Master Kunon?"

"Didn't we just have breakfast, Grandma?"

"Hmmm... It didn't quite fill me up. And if you call me Grandma again, I'll spank you. I'm still young and energetic."

"We haven't even left the estate's grounds."

"But aren't you hungry?"

"How could I be hungry? I'm alone with an attractive woman. My heart and stomach are both full of excitement."

"Guess I'll eat alone, then. Time to dig in!"

"Wow, you weren't joking..."

The two of them exchanged casual banter as the Gurion estate faded into the distance.

Riding along with Iko, who fell asleep as soon as she finished eating, and the crab, whose body was partway out of the coach, Kunon passed through the outer gates of Hughlia's capital.

An early summer breeze drifted in through the open window. It brushed gently over Kunon's cheeks as it passed on its way, off to lands unknown.





Extra Story

Someone Else's Turning Point

"...Who knows how long he'll stay your boyfriend? He won't be as popular as me, but before you know it, girls will start lining up for Kunon. You get it, don't you, Ninth Princess?"

A few insensitive words from a certain Royal Sorcerer were enough to change her.

Mirika Hughlia was the ninth princess of the kingdom and the girl chosen to marry the second Gurion son after he awakened to his magic.

She was going to marry a boy who couldn't see.

Mirika had been full of anxiety when they first met, but now she accepted her fiancé and was his biggest supporter.

Yes, it must have been those callous words that made Mirika decide beyond all shadow of a doubt that she was definitely, absolutely going to marry Kunon Gurion.

"Phew..."

Mirika returned to her modest rooms. She sat down at the table and took a deep breath.

Her entire body hurt. Her muscles were sore almost constantly, and she was never without bruises and scrapes.

She was getting used to it—but it still wasn't enough.

"Princess, your medicinal tea."

“Thank you.”

Laura, her private maid, had brewed her some tea to drink. It was viscous, and the bitter grassy taste was cloying, but she was used to that, too. If a cup of this nasty tea could relieve her fatigue even a little, it was worth drinking.

“School begins soon, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Mirika had graduated from the school for noble children and would soon be headed for the senior school.

“Are you going to make the deadline?”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

After Zeonly’s comment, Mirika had decided to become a knight. Her half brother had laughed at her, saying she was being stupid and impulsive, but Mirika had given it a lot of thought. It was all for the sake of marrying Kunon Gurion.

Mirika intended to earn a knighthood by her own efforts—a real title, unlike her nominal title of ninth princess. It would be a proper achievement.

Eventually, Mirika would be given some territory. Ruling over land required not only knowledge but strength. There would likely be times when she would need to fight magical beasts and thieves and such, both to protect her people and to bring riches to her land.

And in times of peril, she wanted to be able to protect Kunon herself.

With that thought in mind, Mirika decided to become a knight and began training independently.

However...

“They told me it’s too late to apply to the knighthood course. I mean, I don’t think I could pass the entrance exam as I am now, so it’s fine...”

Students at the senior school for nobles could enroll in a knighthood course, but the time period for the application—and the entrance exam, too—had already ended, so Mirika had to proceed as part of the general education

department.

If she still wanted to enter the knighthood course, she would have to take a transfer exam the following year.

Mirika was in need of more rigorous training, so this was actually convenient for her. She had only been aiming for the knighthood course for three months. Her strength was nowhere near what it needed to be.

“I’m going to take the transfer exam next year. I think that will give me enough time to train sufficiently.”

There was no reason to panic yet. It was fine to take things slowly as long as she was still progressing.

...Or so she thought.

“Yo, Princess. Got an invite for you.”

One day in late spring, an uninvited guest appeared in Mirika’s training room—an empty space in the castle used for storage.

“I’ll kill you, you know,” said Laura.

Apparently, he had pushed past her on his way in and entered without permission. As a result, he found himself with the blade of a dagger pressed against the nape of his neck from behind.

His bold smile didn’t even waver.

“That’s enough, Laura.”

Mirika gave the order as she wiped sweat from her brow. Laura, who served as both maid and bodyguard, slipped quietly away from the uninvited guest.

It was Zeonly Finroll.

Having recently become Kunon’s teacher, Zeonly had developed a sort of closeness with Mirika. To be specific, he was part of her escort when she left the castle. Or at least, he was on paper.

“Manners, Zeon.”

The man Mirika had been sparring with—her mentor, Sir Dario Sanz—showed his disapproval. He was a gentleman, totally unlike Zeonly.

“My bad. But this is urgent.”

It must be, Mirika thought. Zeonly was a Royal Sorcerer, and he hardly ever met with Mirika in the castle—or with anyone else in the royal family or in a position of power. If he wasn’t careful, he might get caught up in politics or some other burdensome matter.

“Jenié Kors is at the Black Tower right now. Don’t you want to meet her?”

Mirika did want to meet her. Not for any particular reason, however. She just wanted to see Jenié and find out what she was like.

Jenié Kors.

Whenever Mirika’s fiancé talked about magic, he would mention the name of his old teacher—a woman’s name.

Mirika knew she was overthinking things. She also knew the woman was *far* too old to be in the running for Kunon’s heart. But she still wanted to meet her.

After Mirika and Kunon’s graduation five months ago, Jenié quit her job as Kunon’s private magic tutor.

And now—

“Why is she here?”

“She’s asking for a referral. She said she wants to go back to magic school and retrain. Apparently, when she attended before, she got discouraged by geniuses like me running around. So she’s talking to Londimonde...for the sixth time.”

“Sixth time?”

“He said he wants her to prove she’s talented enough to deserve a referral, and this is her sixth try. That old man is too soft. He gives too many chances.”

It had been five months since Jenié quit her job as Kunon’s teacher, and it seemed she was working on improving herself.

“Anyway, it looks like she’ll succeed this time. That’s why I came to invite you. If you don’t meet her now, you probably won’t get another chance for a while. You’ve got quite the grudge against her, don’t you?”

She did. How could she not?

Jenié was a woman with close ties to magic who occupied more than half her fiancé's heart. How could Mirika not be bothered?

And yet...

“.....”

Mirika's feelings were a bit complicated.

She and Jenié were the same.

These past five months, Mirika had been training desperately to become a knight. And Jenié, who wasn't quite her rival in love...but was nevertheless the target of a slight one-sided hostility—she was training, too.

“...I am interested, but I'll pass.”

Their aims were different, but by some twist of fate, they were both training at the same time.

Mirika needed to put unnecessary things aside and focus on the task at hand. She needed to improve herself. If that was what Jenié was doing, Mirika should be doing the same.

Even if they did meet, what was the point? There wasn't anything Mirika could do. And if she had that kind of time on her hands, it was better spent practicing her swordplay.

She didn't want to lose to Jenié—and not just in training. She *couldn't* lose to her.

“Oh? I see. Well, okay. I was just trying to be considerate.”

“Excuse me?”

“Considerate”? Is there a more inappropriate word to describe someone as rude as you?

She didn't say any of this aloud, but it rang loud and clear in her heart. And perhaps a little of those feelings made it into her expression.

Zeonly grinned and turned his back to her.

“In two years, I'm going to send Kunon to magic school—he and Jenié will probably see each other there.”

“Wait a minute... I said wait!”

But Zeonly didn't wait. Instead, he simply strolled off after putting her in the worst possible state of mind.

As soon as practice was over, Mirika rushed to the library. She needed to do some research on magic school.

She had heard of it before, but since she wasn't a sorcerer, she wasn't well versed in the particulars. She had taken a class on foreign countries as one of her compulsory courses at school, but...

Well, the school wasn't exactly a country, and its internal affairs weren't well-known, so it didn't garner much classroom time in the Hughlian education system... Or perhaps information about the school was deliberately restricted. Mirika couldn't be sure.

The magic city of Dirashik was surrounded by three major powers, and it had developed a unique culture without royalty or nobility. Though, the immortal witch, Gray Rouva, who founded the city, might be considered a kind of monarch.

Many years ago, Gray Rouva singlehandedly fought off invasions from the three surrounding nations—the Empire, the Holy Kingdom, and the New Kingdom—who wanted the land.

Since then, Dirashik had become a kind of sacred, inviolable place. It wasn't a country, but it was treated as an independent nation.

...All that background aside, the magic school was founded because sorcerers from all over the world would gather there to seek the teachings of Gray Rouva. First came the sorcerers, then regular people and merchants arrived, the land became a city, and then—

“...Ugh.”

Even now, it was a place for sorcerers from all over the world to come together. And that was a problem.

What a headache.

Whatever his intentions, it seemed Zeonly's consideration had been genuine.

“They might really meet up again... Actually, it seems inevitable.”

The more she learned, the more sure Mirika became that Kunon would want to go to magic school. And she would have no way stop him.

Going to magic school was an important step on his path to becoming a successful sorcerer.

And as his wife-to-be, it would be unforgivable to try to stop him.



The months passed, and nothing of note happened.

If pressed, one might mention that Mirika, for certain reasons, had postponed her transfer to the knighthood course for another year. But other than that, ostensibly, there was nothing.

Plenty of things—almost too many—happened behind the scenes, but... Well, all that would surely come to light after Kunon’s return from magic school.

There were the magic tools developed jointly by Kunon and Zeonly, for instance.

One such tool was a thread they called the Thermal Fiber.

This was a heating device in the form of a string that generated warmth because it was infused with magic. It could be woven into fabrics, and it became highly prized after, being used by the king and queen in lap blankets and other items. It was eventually used in trade with other countries. Mirika made frequent use of it, too.

Then there was the container known as the Adhesive Water Vessel.

Water put into it became a semisolid cream, which could be applied over the top of ointments and the like to protect injured areas and the medicine itself. Mirika used this tool often as well.

There were also several inventions used as building materials. Publicly, all of these were presented as the creations of Zeonly Finroll, but some high-ranking individuals, including the king, knew the truth: It was the efforts of his apprentice that had sped up Zeonly’s research by nearly ten years.

Soon after Kunon turned twelve and left for magic school, Mirika finally passed the transfer exam to enter the knighthood course. In fact, it was the first time she was able to take the exam at all.

She missed the deadline her first year, and for certain reasons, she couldn't take it the following year.

But now, here she was, in the third-year girls' class of the knighthood course.

"Hey, look. It's the Delinquent Princess."

"What? Why is Princess Mirika in the knighthood course?"

"Maybe she was so bad that she got kicked out of Gen Ed?"

Rumors about her flew through the room, and Mirika ignored them.

But on the inside, she was a little hurt.

"So that's how they see me, huh...?"

Mirika Hughlia was almost fourteen, and two years into her goal of becoming a knight.

These days, she was known for hanging around and getting into mischief with well-known troublemaker Lyle Hughlia, the sixth prince of the kingdom. She had even earned herself a nickname: the Delinquent Princess.



Afterword

Nice to meet you, everyone! And hello again to those I've met before.

I'm Umikaze Minamino.

Thank you for picking up my book, *Kunon the Sorcerer Can See*.

Are you reading it at home? Or maybe in the bookstore? Not sure what to buy?

In that case, please buy this book and bring it home with you.

This novel was originally published on the Shousetsuka ni Narou and AlphaPolis websites before being made into a book.

It got so popular that even I was confused. One thing led to another, and it was novelized.

This must be my peak. I must have used up enough good fortune for a lifetime.

I'm scared and a little worried about my karma, but I have no choice but to ride this wave. I want to make a lot of money. I want to save up for my later years. I want luxury. I want to indulge. I want to try a T-bone steak for the first time. I want to bring the T-bone or whatever home with me and display it in my living room as a souvenir. I want to throw my money around. I want friends. I want to actually buy the books of authors I admire. Then I want to post a picture showing off my purchase on Twitter or wherever, saying "I bought it!" to butter them up. I want to make strong connections. Incidentally, how is it that I can write a flow like this, but it doesn't sound at all like a rap? My appetite is insatiable. I don't even have one friend.

Shousetsuka ni Narou is the kind of dream website where one's naked ambitions or desire to become a rapper might come true.

Please support Shousetsuka ni Narou and AlphaPolis, where you can always find the type of stories you want to read and where you can have others read the stories you write. Please note, however, that this work was removed from AlphaPolis once novelized.

As previously mentioned, this novel was made possible by the support of many people.

Thank you to all the readers on Shousetsuka ni Narou and AlphaPolis.

Thank you to the handful of people who call themselves my fans, and even to those who wouldn't. Because of you all, I was able to make this book. I might even finally get to eat a T-bone steak.

Thank you to Laruha, in charge of the illustrations for this book, for your beautiful artwork.

When I looked at the rough sketches, I immediately thought, *It's Kunon!* I was surprised, because your drawings looked more like Kunon than the version of him in my head. Your art skills surpassed my wildest dreams. Your work is simply splendid.

The manga version of this book by La-na is scheduled to start in *Monthly Comic Alive*. The art is wonderful and so lovely. The various characters come to life through the beautiful drawings. You can watch them get into all sorts of situations. What do you think? Do you want to see it? I do.

To Kadokawa Books, who approached me about this novel, and to O, the editor in charge: Thank you so much for your help in editing and revising the novelization.

I am very grateful. I hope we can work together for a long time.

To cut straight to the point, I would like this to become a series that lasts for at least ten books. I want various things to happen. I would love to talk about some kind of film or TV version. And I have high hopes for the manga.

I wonder if there will be a next installment.

Maybe there won't.

But I'll keep hoping, so let's meet again in Volume 2!

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